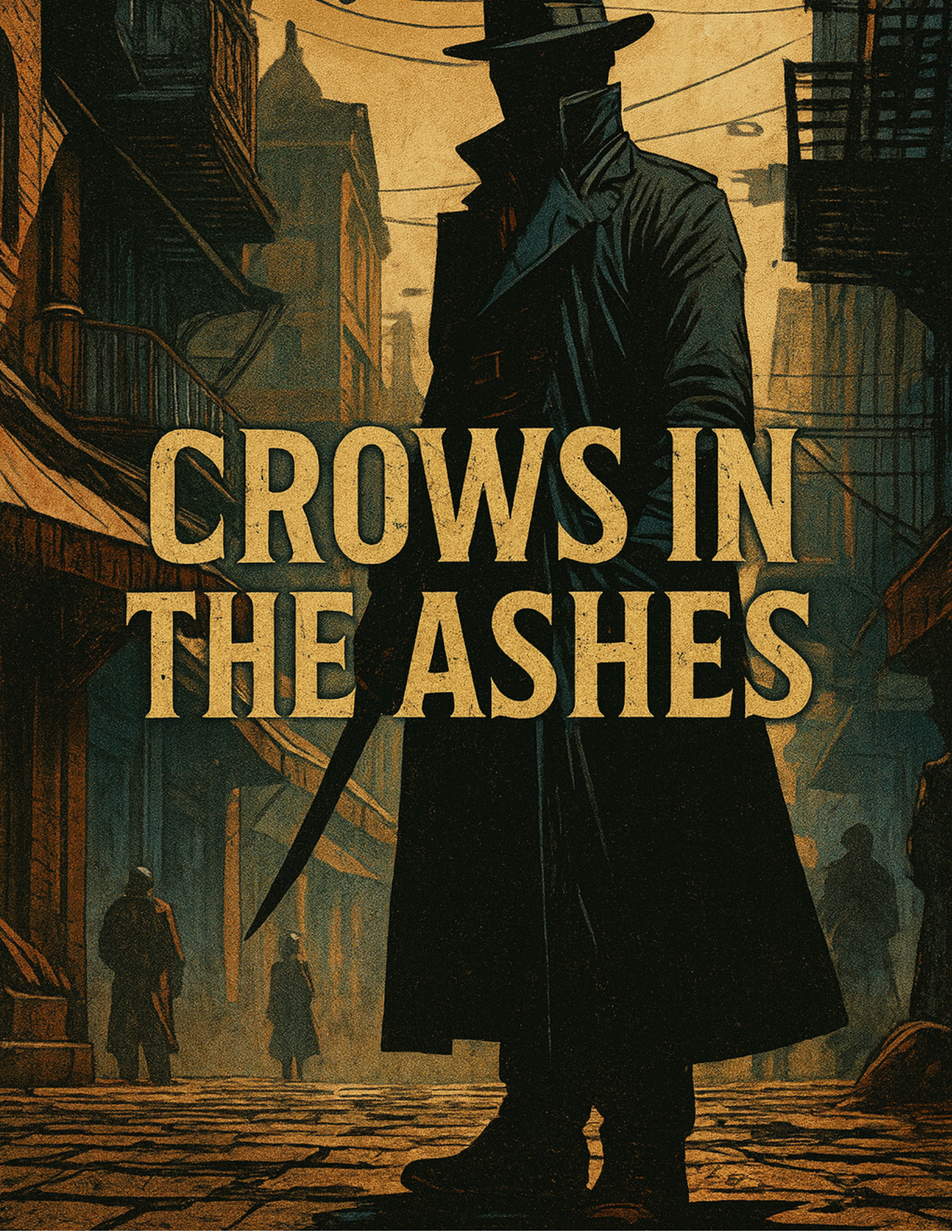
CROWS IN
THE ASHES

About This Book

Crows in the Ashes is the second chapter in the saga that began with *Ashes of the Unseen*. Where the first book followed the Crows as outlaws stumbling into destiny, this continuation plunges them deeper into Doskvol's fog-drenched streets, where survival has grown sharper, deadlier, and far more costly.

The fragile victories of the past have only painted targets on their backs. Now the Crows stand in open conflict with the Ember Circle, one of the city's most ruthless powers, even as Merrow Valesque makes his own moves from the shadows, twisting chaos to his advantage. Every scheme, every betrayal, pulls the city further toward collapse—and the Crows into battles they can't afford to lose.

Written with the same pulse of episodic television, each chapter carries discovery, danger, and dread, as one "villain of the week" feeds into a much larger tale of power, fate, and family. This sequel sharpens the stakes: ghosts, factions, and old gods close in while Doskvol teeters on the edge of ruin. What began as survival in Ashes of the Unseen has become a fight for the very soul of the city—and the Crows are right in the middle of the fire.

Crows in the Ashes
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Dedication
For my old table, who taught me the rules of play — and how much fun it is to break them.

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Chapter 00: **The Breath Before the Beginning**

Doskvol doesn't repent. It remembers.

Some nights force the city to hold its breath until the lamps gutter. This was one of them—back when Merrow Valesque's laughter sat on the rooftops like frost, and peace was a rumor people paid to hear. Ashvale burned first. Not a clean burn—an ugly, oily fire that crawled along cobbles and climbed brick in bright animal leaps. Smoke pressed alleys flat. Gaslight turned copper in the haze. A bell clanged without rhythm; glass fell as a second weather. Three banners ran the same direction for once. Gloam black. Circle brass. Imperial blue. Each had sworn they'd never stand shoulder to shoulder with the others. Each did. Even the city blinked at that.

A Ember Circle agent staggered out of the heat with a fireproof coat buckled to his throat and a brass firelance hugged to his chest. Fear-gas had split his world into wrong pieces; his pupils were dinner-plate wide. "Get back—get BACK!" he screamed at nothing and everyone. The lance coughed a white cone that shaved plaster from a wall and torched a hanging line of wash, turning sheets into flaring pennants. He pivoted, sobbing, and hosed the street—an Imperial trooper dove; a Gloam acolyte threw up an arm too slow and came away with scorched lace and blistered skin. The agent howled at a phantom only he could see and sprinted into the smoke.

A Gloam witch in a soot-smeared shawl set her feet in the roadway's throat. Her hands cut sigils into the air; the smoke remembered old shapes and moved to her will. Opposite her lurched a grease-slick brute with a bandolier of glass jars and a grin that didn't belong on a man. He yanked a stopper—vinegar-mustard reek exploded—hurled the jar, and sticky flame spat across the cobbles. She flicked two fingers; the fire licked up and ran back toward him like an obedient hound. He slipped, swore—never hit street proper, because an ordinary citizen, eyes milk-white and weeping, slammed into the witch from the side and locked both hands around her throat. "Sorry… sorry…" the woman sobbed as she squeezed. The witch head-butted once—crack—stole a ragged breath, spat a black rune that stole the strength from the citizen like someone cut her strings. The brute was already laughing again, fishing for another jar with shaking hands.

The Imperial line made a door out of a wall with shoulders and a ram. "Masks on!" a lieutenant barked; filters snapped into place with shaking fingers. "Non-lethal if you can—lethal if you must." The first civilians poured down the tenement stairs at them—teeth, nails, wrong. A young officer froze. The first man to reach him had a darning needle driven clean through his own cheek; he smiled around the metal and kept coming. "Hold—hold—" the lieutenant started, and the officer broke, firing twice into the chest of a mother in a charred nightgown. She fell like a door unhinged. He made a sound no uniform could fix; a sergeant dragged him back by his collar and stepped into his place.

Illusions complicated everything the way the Royal Family liked complications. A squad rushed a barricade that wasn't there and slammed into stacked crates painted like shadow. A Gloam spearwall braced for a charging line of knife-men who melted at the last second into laughter

and smoke. Twice the Circle withdrew from a phantom blaze while a very real one ate their flank. Somewhere a man wept because the sky wouldn't stop moving. Somewhere else a mirror showed a room that had never existed and someone in it waving for help that wouldn't come. Emberlash stood at the end of a firebreak and did nothing while flames tried to read his face. Men watched him instead of the blaze; they always did. When he finally lifted his hand, it was decisive and almost gentle. "Hold the west line," he said, voice quiet enough to make people lean. "Choke the alleys. The fire is not a pet tonight. Cut it where it feeds." His zealots moved like a single thought finished. He smelled of soot and control; when he was still, something inside him paced the bars. The push came like the first clean breath after drowning. Hex-lines went up, quiet and black—no life crossed them without permission. The Circle cut flame into thin, hungry ribbons that obeyed only Emberlash. Imperial shields made a roof against falling glass. Step by step, the crooked tenement at the street's apex—the one that held the noise like a bell—grew large, and the night behind it grew small. "Breach team—go," someone shouted, voice iron-flat. A ram kissed the door; hinges screamed. Figures in blue and black vanished inside, swallowed by bad light and worse laughter.

Outside, the city kept fighting itself because chaos demanded witnesses. A lad with cinder burns on his wrists threw a brick through a window that had already shattered, then stared at his empty hands as if they'd betrayed him. Two Circle burners hauled a hose cart down an alley, not to save a house but to drown a line of purple vapor crawling along the gutter like a living bruise. An Espiritas crew marked bodies with chalk before the ghosts could stand; one chalk line trembled under the sergeant's fingers, and he pressed harder until it held. A searchlight found the smoke and turned ash to glitter. The bell went on clanging, stubborn and off-beat. Somewhere a child called for a name that didn't answer. Somewhere a dog howled and wouldn't stop. The battle raged on, a storm of fire, smoke, and blood that swallowed the narrow streets of Doskvol whole. The Circle's fire-spewers shrieked as their tanks hissed and flared, their beams of flame cutting arcs of searing light through the smoke. Fear gas still clung to the cobblestones, its green haze turning friend against friend, officer against officer. Gloam witches hurled shadow-born abominations into the melee, only for them to be dragged down by mind-controlled townsfolk driven forward like cattle under the Royal Family's cruel spell. The Imperial Police struggled to hold their lines, rifles barking into the tide of hallucinating civilians, every volley ripping apart the illusion of order they clung to. And then—it came.

A sudden roar, like the city itself had taken a sharp breath. A house at the edge of the square convulsed with fire, its windows bursting outward in a thousand shards of light. For one heartbeat it was as though a second sun had torn itself into existence above the battlefield, painting every face in hues of terror and awe. The blast ripped through the smoke, scattering embers like stars across the night sky. From that eruption came a body. It was flung through the air as though rejected by the inferno itself, crashing into the smoldering wreck of a carriage already toppled and burning. The man's form struck with a sickening crack, slamming against twisted wood and charred iron before sliding to the cobblestones.

Merrow Valesque.

His grin, once a weapon sharper than any blade, was bloodied now, smeared across a face battered and raw. His prison tatters clung to him in ribbons, his flamboyant coat burned and half in shreds, its velvet edges trailing smoke. His chest heaved as though each breath was a fight he might lose. Ash clung to his too-bright eyes, but the fire in them—mad and unyielding—still burned. His fingers twitched in restless spasms, searching for something to break, something to twist. He looked, for the first time, like prey. And then—she appeared. Not with the rush of boots or the crash of doors, but as if the shadows themselves bent and bled her into existence. A ripple in the air, a shimmer of power, and suddenly she was there—Lira Quinval.

Her presence froze the chaos for a heartbeat, as though the world itself had been caught holding its breath. Dark silks clung to her figure, the long coat whispering like living shadow as it stirred in the hot wind. Her hair, half-loosened from its tie, danced wild in the emberlight, catching the glow of fire like a crown of flame. Her eyes, sharp and unflinching, locked on Merrow with a fury so pure it seemed to silence even the screaming. Around them, the battlefield churned on—screams of the burning, the crack of rifles, the growl of abominations tearing flesh. But in the center of it all, amid fire and ruin, stood two figures caught in a stillness more violent than the war itself. Merrow sprawled in blood and ash, his body broken but his madness unbroken. Lira, a wraith born of vengeance, materialized from nothing to stand before him. The city's chaos faded into background noise. The war had many fronts, but here—here was its heart. The hunter and the monster, finally face-to-face.:

The first light of dawn crept timidly over the horizon, but the streets of Doskvol knew no peace. Fire still burned in broken windows, corpses sprawled in gutters, and the air itself trembled with the violence of the night. And there, amid the ruin, the two figures finally converged. Merrow Valesque, bloodied but unbowed, rose from the wreckage with that impossible grin carved into his face like a wound that refused to heal. His coat hung in tatters, his chest heaved with ragged laughter, and yet his eyes glittered with that manic brightness—as if all of Doskvol's suffering were a private joke only he could hear. Across from him stood Lira Quinval, leader of the Gloam Sisters, her presence cutting through the chaos like a blade through smoke. Cloaked in black silk that writhed in the heat of the fires, her figure was poised, her gaze fixed squarely on Merrow. No wild grin, no taunt—just a steady, unflinching resolve. The sight of him was a scar reopened, but she let none of her trembling fury slip past the iron discipline of her stance.

They moved as if pulled together by fate. Knives glinted in the firelight. Merrow twirled his blade like a toy, letting the steel dance in his restless fingers, mocking the very notion of danger. Lira drew hers with ritual precision, holding it low and close, every line of her body honed to purpose. And then they clashed. Steel struck steel with a shriek that split the dawn. Merrow lunged, his strikes jagged and unpredictable, every movement fueled by the raw chaos that defined him. He fought like a storm given flesh—wild feints, sudden stabs, reckless spins that should have left him open but somehow didn't. His laughter rang out, shrill and terrible, each burst of mirth cutting through the screams of battle like a curse.

Lira, by contrast, was all control. Her knife carved arcs with surgical precision, every strike measured, every parry born of discipline and fury held tightly in check. She was a dancer in the firelight, her movements sharp and deliberate, her every riposte a reminder that vengeance was not blind—it was patient, honed, and merciless. Sparks flew with every clash, falling around them like burning rain. Merrow's laughter grew louder, feeding on the madness, while Lira's silence became sharper, heavier, until even her breath seemed to carry weight. The world shrank to the ring of steel, to the flare of their blades, to the meeting of chaos and vengeance.

"You always were a thorn, weren't you?" Merrow hissed between ragged breaths, his grin splitting wider as if pain itself were amusing. "You think this is the end? Oh, sweetheart—chaos doesn't die. It laughs." Lira's only reply was the drive of her blade, a slash that forced him stumbling back against the wreckage of the carriage. Her eyes burned with a fury deeper than the flames licking the street, a fury that had been waiting, festering, for years. She pressed forward, her strikes a relentless storm of purpose. He parried with wild abandon, his movements erratic yet sharp, the unpredictability of a cornered predator. But even as he twisted and laughed, blood flew with every near miss. His manic strength was faltering, and Lira's control was tightening around him like a noose.

"You brought this on yourself," she hissed at last, her voice steady as stone even in the storm. "You are the architect of your own destruction." The words cut deeper than the steel. Merrow's laugh cracked into something raw, desperate, his grin a bloody mask stretched too thin. Still, he

lunged again, one last reckless flurry, his knife flashing with manic strength. But Lira was already there—waiting, prepared. Her blade intercepted his with a shriek of steel and turned his momentum against him. With a twist of her wrist and a surge of strength, she drove him down to the cobblestones. For a moment, the battlefield seemed to hold its breath. The fires hissed, the gas curled, the screams quieted. Merrow lay sprawled in the ash, chest heaving, laughter now choked and broken. Lira stood over him, her blade gleaming, her hand steady. The terror of Doskvol—the nightmare that had haunted its alleys and plazas, the mad king of chaos—was on his back. And for the first time, he looked small.

Valesque's frustration boiled over, erupting into wild fury. His blade slashed in unpredictable arcs, every movement desperate yet vicious. Blood streaked his face, dripping from a gash above his brow, but the manic grin refused to fade. His voice cracked into a shrill roar. "Is this all you've got?" he screamed, laughter bubbling through the words. "I'll tear this city apart before I go down!" Lira's stance never wavered. Her every motion was precise, economical, her silhouette framed against the chaos burning all around them. The fires licked the sky, glass shattered from above, but her voice cut through the madness like ice through flame. "Enough talk," she said. "This is your final act."

Their knives met again in a shriek of steel. Lira's blade caught Merrow's with practiced grace, twisted, and tore it from his grip. The weapon spun across the cobblestones, clattering to a halt in the filth. Merrow stumbled back, clutching at his bleeding shoulder, eyes wild with pain but lit with that terrible spark.

"You've beaten me," he rasped, his grin faltering into a grimace. "But the chaos—"

"—ends tonight," Lira snapped, stepping forward, blade raised for the strike. Merrow's laugh cracked, breaking into a desperate howl. "You think you've won? The Terror's game never ends! Doskvol dies with me!"

And then Lira struck—swift, surgical, her knife plunging into his shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground. He gasped, blood choking his laughter into silence. His words spilled out like the last embers of a fire.

"You'll… never stop it," he whispered, his grin stretched in agony. "Doskvol… dies with me."

Lira stood over him, her chest heaving, her blade poised above his heart. The firelight glinted on steel, on her eyes filled with hate and grief. She tightened her grip. But before she could finish it, the night cracked with a single shot. The bullet hissed past, grazing her thigh. Not a wound to kill—just enough to stagger her. She spun, rage in her eyes, searching for the coward who dared. And there he was. Through the haze of smoke and flame, a young soldier stepped into view, boots crunching glass and ash. His white hair clung damp with sweat and blood, his once-polished uniform ripped and streaked with dirt and crimson. His pale face bore scratches from the fighting, but his eyes—his eyes burned cold and sharp, like steel drawn from the forge. Morian Ishtar. The boy soldier of the Imperial Police stood firm, pistol still raised, his expression a mask of iron. Blood flecked his cheek where someone else's life had ended at arm's reach, but his hand never trembled. The chaos of the battlefield raged around him, yet he seemed untouched by its madness—an unyielding presence, a man who already believed himself master of the city's fate. And his gaze met Lira's, hard, commanding, unblinking.

The shot still echoed in Lira's ears as she turned, her blade dripping crimson, her leg burning where the bullet had grazed her. Her voice came raw and furious, louder than the fires consuming the street. "Why?" she spat, her knife still aimed at Merrow's chest. "Why in all the hells would you stop me now?!" Morian didn't flinch. His pistol remained level, the barrel unwavering though the world burned behind him. "Because he must be taken in," he said, voice calm and cold, cutting through the din of screams and steel. "Not killed here. Not like this."

Lira's laugh was venomous, sharp with disbelief. "Not like this? He butchered this city! He butchered *me*! This was not our deal, Morian—he dies tonight!" Merrow, sprawled in the blood-slick cobblestones, wheezed and coughed, then broke into a bubbling laugh. His teeth shone red. "Listen to her," he crooned, his voice ragged but mocking. "She knows the truth. You think you've caged me, boy? Doskvol will die with me." Lira snapped, pressing her knife harder against his throat, her hand trembling with rage. But the weight of Morian's pistol pinned her still. His eyes, sharp as blades, never left hers.

"He *will* die," Morian said, each word deliberate. "But not by your hand. Not in the street. The city needs to see him fall—him and every last one of his rabid dogs. If you kill him now, he becomes a ghost story. If we drag him through the courts, through the gallows, he becomes a warning." The smoke roared, flames consuming another house, but the street seemed to still around the three of them. Merrow chuckled again, a gurgling, broken sound. "Warnings fade. Stories last. And my story… my sweet Lira… never ends." She froze, every nerve screaming to end it right there, to bury her blade in his heart and finish the nightmare once and for all. But Morian's gun was steady, his authority absolute. Slowly, painfully, she let the knife hover, her fury locked against his will.

And so it was that Merrow Valesque was taken alive on that night. Dragged in chains, beaten but grinning, his gang scattered or slaughtered in the gutters. The Terror of Doskvol silenced—for a time. And Morian Ishtar rose on his triumph, a soldier no longer but a captain, his name carved into the bones of the city's law. Merrow was sentenced to the death row, his execution promised to the people. That promise soothed Lira's fury—for a while. Enough for the streets to quiet, for the smoke to thin, for Doskvol to breathe again. Well. At least until…

Chapter 1: **Instruments of Lies and Men**

Doskvol pretends at morning.

The whistles still bleat on the river, carts still groan on worn cobbles, and the milk-sellers still clink their bottles like nothing in the bones has shifted. Fog lifts by inches from the canals, soot turns the first light the color of old coins, and the city wears its same, tired mask. But underneath, something has changed. It isn't the streets; it's the people returning to them. Four of them most of all.

Jack has claimed the narrow table by the back window—three city maps unrolled and weighted with whatever the house could spare: a cracked inkpot, a coil of wire, a chipped mug gone cold. Today's map is not the neat surveyor's grid; it's a palimpsest of the truth as he understands it—chalk ghosts of former plans, grease-pencil rings where a man can vanish, needle-prick holes where they've bled before. He draws a line, stops, rubs it out with the side of his hand. Circles are crossed. Routes dead-end into question marks. In the margin, he's written Ladher? and smudged it half away with too much thinking. He drags a thumb along the river like he could change its current by touch, then lets the pencil go still. For once, he doesn't have a thread to pull. He breathes like he remembers to rather than wants to.

Harry hasn't left the front window since the light changed from coal to pewter. He stands just to one side of the glass, as if superstition alone could keep a sniper from guessing the shape of his head. He watches weather like it's a message. The rain isn't rain yet; it's that thick, hanging mist Doskvol likes, the kind that blurs distances and erases edges. It would be good for disappearing, if he believed in good anymore. His hands are too still. The pocket where he keeps too many secrets looks oddly flat; he left the thing that made him brave—and dangerous—locked away last night, and the absence rubs at him like a missing tooth. People pass below in twos and threes, collars up, heads down. None of them know that a man died in a glass box while the wealthy practiced bidding. None of them know the air itself has learned a new way to kill. Harry's jaw works around a sentence that won't swallow. In the glass he sees his own face and an empty chair behind him and two futures he doesn't like either way.

Downstairs, the house is close and wet with steam. The underground hospital never smells like only one thing. This morning it is a quarrel of carbolic, burnt coffee, wet linen, and the iron tang that refuses to be scoured out of boards. Lamps stare from hooks like tired eyes; copper pipes tick while they cool. Dr. Lazarus passes once—sleeves rolled, spectacles fogged—and mutters something that might be a prayer or a curse depending on where you start it. Mitch moves like he learned to borrow his grace from a quieter world; he's steady on the stitch and quick with the clamp, and he keeps asking the coffee to forgive him before he pours another cup. On the second cot from the stove, Rabbit's Foot sits half upright, stripped to the waist, his right arm bandaged where the bullet kissed and then bit on the way out. The brand Constant burned into his skin glows faintly under sweat and lamplight—just a suggestion, the way a memory suggests itself even when you didn't invite it. He's smiling the way a man smiles when a room needs it and he doesn't have anything else to pay with.

Harleena stands at the basin, sleeves rolled to the elbow, hands in red that wants to be pink and won't. Water coughs from the pump and hits the tin like rain on a roof. Her fingers tremble—not from squeamishness; she has stitched worse in worse light—but from the stored electricity of rage with nowhere honorable to go. She rinses the cloth, wrings it, crosses back to Rabbit. The dog watches from under the table, head on paws, eyes tracking only her. He knows who decides if a room lives.

“Hold still,” she says, and the command is quieter than anger. Her voice has that careful flatness she uses when a thing must be done before a thing can be said.

“I am,” Rabbit says, and tries to be.

She cleans the edge of the wound again. Blood unlatches from skin and curls into the cloth like it’s been waiting. Rabbit watches her not watch him. “It was thirty minutes,” he says. “Less, if it’s pure.”

Her hands pause a fraction too long over the basin. “I heard,” she answers. “I saw enough to ruin breakfast.” The cloth moves again. “No trace. That’s what the man said. No trace, no witness except the ones who want it.”

“It was a sales pitch,” Rabbit says. “And the room bought. Not with coin—yet. With breath. With attention. That’s the first payment.” He swallows. His mouth is dry again. “Adrian didn’t die like a rival. He died like a… demonstration.”

Harleena’s jaw tightens until tendons stand. “Don’t name him like you knew him.” It isn’t fair and she knows it; fairness is for slower mornings. She draws air in, lets it out in a slow ribbon. “He was Cypher. He made choices. And still—” Her eyes flick once to the stove, as if it might speak. “No one deserves to be turned into a pamphlet.”

“Oskar doesn’t write pamphlets,” Rabbit says, and the name tastes like copper. “He writes contracts.” He flexes the fingers of his good hand and winces only a little. “He’s got something under that patch. He called me by my real name without moving his mouth. The Eye is not a rumor.” That draws her gaze up and into him, sharp and bright. “He looked at you and knew you,” she says, voice winnowed to thread. “And still you’re breathing.”

“He gave me five minutes,” Rabbit says, and there’s humor in it, but it’s the kind humor uses when it sits with grief. “Out of admiration or cruelty. With men like him those are siblings.” The cloth stops. She wrings it over the basin and the water runs pale. “You should have died there,” she says plainly, and the words don’t sting because he knows she’s right. “You should have, and you didn’t, and now we have to use that accident like we meant it.”

From the stair, one floor up, the boards give a small, apologetic complaint—Jack shifting his weight, perhaps, or the house remembering a footfall it’s known too long. Harleena’s eyes tick upward, then back. “I’m still angry,” she says, without looking at the stair and very much meaning it for it. “At him. At Harry. Powder in my face and choices made for me.” She presses clean cloth to Rabbit’s arm; he hisses, then nods. “If I let myself keep it first in line, I’ll lose to a bigger cruelty.”

“Ladher,” Rabbit says.

“Ladher,” she echoes, and the word dims the room a degree. “A man in a chair showed you how to erase a city without smoke. That’s bigger than my hurt.”

A beat. Upstairs, Harry’s silhouette wavers in the ripple of the wavy glass as if he might dissolve into the weather if he stands there long enough. He’s still looking for a sign the day will be kind; the day isn’t listening.

“What did it feel like?” Harleena asks, surprising herself. “When the darkness fell. That trinket of yours. That Veil.”

“Quiet,” Rabbit says. “Like the world forgot its lines and waited to be written. Terrifying, and kind. It bought us breathing. Not more.”

She ties off the bandage with a neat, hard knot. Her hands are steady now that the work is almost done. “Then here is the air we bought.” She straightens, wipes her palms once on her apron, and finally looks fully at him. “We warn Lazarus. We warn Mitch. Anyone with a clinic or a kettle and a conscience. The Stoneborn kids get told that smoke that smells like violets is not a gift. The Unseen can learn to listen without making me beg. We find where that poison sleeps before it wakes again.”

Jack appears at the bottom of the stair, maps under his arm like a priest carrying scripture he doesn’t believe but can’t stop reciting. He stops when he sees the bandage and the basin and Harleena’s temperature. He chooses the one thing safe to say. “How bad?”

“Bad,” Harleena answers. “Alive.” The word applies to the arm and to more. Harry lingers on the last step, hands on the rail as if asking the wood for permission to join the room. His mouth opens. Closes. He nods to Rabbit like a man confessing without words. Harleena does not nod back, but she does not turn away either. Jack lays the top map on the nearest clean patch of table. The city sprawls in smudged graphite and ink. Some of the circles are new; none of them are friendly. He taps a blank between them, then takes his hand back. “None of it lines up,” he admits, voice dry. “If Ladher’s stockpiled anywhere, they’re ghosting the stash—moving labs, modular kit, piggy-backing legitimate shipments. Or they’re not stockpiling at all and we’re chasing a shadow. I don’t know.” He hates the sentence and makes himself say it anyway. “We need information. Real. From inside.”

“And leverage,” Harleena says, crisp as a signed order. “We don’t have enough barrels or talismans. We need both. More eyes, more bite.”

“Constant can harden minds,” Rabbit offers, flexing the bandaged arm. “The Cyphers can build filters if they trust us. The Enigma folk hear things no one says out loud. But none of that comes free.”

“Nothing worth a city does,” Jack says. He sets a fingertip to the word he smudged—Ladher?—and underlines the question mark like a promise. “We don’t guess our way into this. We buy, steal, or beg the right truths first. Then we move.” A quiet settles, not peace—just the kind of silence a room makes when a path has admitted it exists. Upstairs, the bell of a distant factory coughs out the hour as if embarrassed to keep doing its job. The dog rises, stretches, and puts his head against Harleena’s knee, claiming her like the first good idea of the day. “We’re not ready,” Harry says into the space the bell leaves. “But if we wait until we are, they’ve already won.”

“No one in this city has ever been ready,” Jack answers. “We move anyway. Smarter. Harder.” Harleena rinses the last of Rabbit’s blood from her hands. It swirls in the basin like a small weather, then vanishes down the iron throat. She dries her fingers on clean linen and looks at each of them as if reenlisting them one by one. “Then eat something that isn’t fear,” she says. “Wash. Burn what you wore. Jim Bob keeps the door. After that, we start paying for truths.” As if on cue, a soft knock touches the rear entrance—three slow, one quick—the kind that means the knocker knows you and knows you don’t appreciate surprises. Jim Bob’s voice arrives ahead of him: “Company.” He steps in, cap in hand, and lifts a sealed envelope pinched carefully between finger and thumb. Black wax, a sigil pressed clean. “And this came by runner,” he adds. “From Nicolas Nightwood. Says he wishes to meet again.”

The Shadow’s Den breathed with its usual hush, a room built for secrets rather than sound. Candlelight guttered low in iron sconces, struggling against curtains that shut out the night. Smoke clung to the rafters like the ghosts of every whispered deal made here, turning the air thick and sour with stale tobacco and damp wool. Velvet tapestries hung heavy on the walls,

their embroidered patterns twisting into new shapes the longer you stared—faces, perhaps, or sigils that ought not to be remembered. In the far corner, where the light barely reached, Nicolas Nightwood sat waiting. His coat pooled around his chair like black water, his eyes pale as ash, restless even in stillness. The Crows entered as one. Jack first, boots tapping quietly against the floorboards, his shoulders squared but his eyes shadowed with the weight of maps and unanswered questions. Behind him, Harry kept near the wall, his gaze drawn more to the stained glass of the bar's lone high window than the meeting ahead—his young face carved into worry he couldn't quite hide. Harleena moved last, her steps sharp, her jaw tight, carrying with her the silence of someone who hadn't forgiven. They drew a subtle shift in the room's current; conversations paused, glasses stilled. This was no ordinary company.

Nicolas watched them approach, unreadable as stone. Jack didn't waste breath on pleasantries. He planted both hands on the table, leaning in just enough for his voice to cut through the haze. "That mission," he said, each word measured but edged, "was a lot more dangerous than you let on, Nicolas. If we're going to keep bleeding for your errands, there has to be more in it for us." The hooded man's grey eyes flicked up, catching Jack's with a glint like flint striking steel. "I understand," Nicolas said quietly, the words heavy as though dragged from some place he didn't want to show. "I do. But there's something more pressing than coin." He tilted his head, gaze sweeping the bar with the paranoia of a man who trusted shadows more than faces. His voice dropped low, a murmur only their corner could hear. "We don't have much time." Before Jack could spit another demand, the room shifted again. Three figures approached, their arrival cutting the ambient murmur into silence. Sheila Crawford led them, her steps fluid, her coat a sweep of silks that seemed to carry its own gravity. Behind her prowled Billy Bishop, wiry and watchful, eyes darting to every exit as though already planning his escape. Samuel Barkely loomed last, a slab of muscle and menace, the weight of his boots making the floor groan with each step. They settled around the table without a word, but the air thickened all the same.

It was Sheila who broke the silence. She reached into her coat with delicate fingers and drew out something small, yet impossibly heavy. She set it down between the glasses and shadows. The Umbral Scale. At once, the atmosphere bent. The brass shimmered faintly, catching the candlelight but refusing to cast a single shadow. The pans swayed once on their chains, then stilled with unnatural balance. A faint hum pressed against the bones, too low for ears, too deep to ignore. Rabbit felt it first. The Umbral Ring, hidden beneath his coat, gave a sudden pulse—warm, insistent—like a heartbeat that wasn't his own. His breath caught, chest tightening, as if the artifact inside him strained toward its kin. Across the table, Harry stiffened, his hand brushing against his coat where the Rod lay concealed. The wood seemed to thrum in sympathy, answering the Scale with a whisper only he could hear. Their eyes flicked toward each other in the dim light, a shared understanding without words. This was no ordinary trinket.

Harleena's gaze hardened as the faint glow of the Scale lit Sheila's pale hands, her voice sharp with suspicion. "What is that?" Sheila met her stare with calm certainty, her tone smooth as still water but carrying the weight of command. "This," she said, her fingers resting lightly on the cold brass, "is the Umbral Scale. And it is active now. No lies. No secrets. From this moment on… we speak only truth." The light pulsed once, steady, unnatural. Around it, shadows bent away, leaving their corner unnervingly bare. No matter how faint the glow, it illuminated nothing but itself. And for the first time that night, the Shadow's Den felt darker still.

Nicolas let the silence run a breath longer, then inclined his head. "Nicolas Nightwood," he said, voice low, clear. "These are Sheila Crawford, Billy Bishop, Samuel Barkely." His gloved hand hovered over the Scale, not touching. "We call ourselves Enigma." Rabbit's mouth twitched, dry humor that didn't reach his eyes. "Already learned that." Nicolas's pale gaze flicked to him, a brief spark of respect. "I'm not surprised," he said. "Word is you're an investigator who finds what's not meant to be found."

Sheila's graceful hand brushed the Scale's pillar; the pans steadied to a perfect poise. "Before we speak," she said, her tone soft and unyielding, "know this: only those at this table can see the Scale. To everyone else, it isn't here. Consider it a truth test. No lies, and nothing happens." A subtle pulse answered her words, the metal singing just below hearing. "It's a precaution. I trust you'll understand." Harleena held Sheila's eyes for a long, measured beat. She didn't nod. She didn't need to. The muscle in her jaw eased a fraction.

Nicolas folded his hands. "We need to talk about the Ladher." Harry shifted, the chair creaking in the hush. His glance slid to Harleena—seeking anchor, permission, both—and then he squared to Nightwood. "The Ladher… it's a weapon," he said, voice tight. "We saw it in action. Worse than anything we've ever encountered. It doesn't just kill. It wipes everything out. No trace. No survivors. Pure destruction." The Scale's pans did not move. Truth settled like weight.

Harleena's voice came in, flat and iron. "It was demonstrated right in front of us." Her hand, resting on the table, bled water-pale knuckles into the candlelight. "We were lucky to make it out alive." Nicolas listened as if memorizing a confession, the ash-grey of his eyes deepening. "Was Merrow there?" he asked. "Did you see him?" Jack leaned back, the leather of his coat creaking. Calculations moved behind his stare and found only fog. "We don't know," he said. "We've been chasing his shadow. Not the man." A muscle jumped in his cheek. "There was a man there. I heard it could be him."

"Yeah,during the presentation…" Harry added, and the last word left his mouth like something he wanted to spit. "During that. But like he said—we aren't sure." For a heartbeat, Nicolas closed his eyes. When he opened them, the room felt closer. "There's something you need to know." His voice lost its edges, gained weight. "We've been on Merrow a long time. We've confirmed something." He let the sentence hang on the hook of the Scale's hum. "Merrow and Pennwright are working together." The ripple that passed through the Crows wasn't sound so much as pressure—air tightening, shoulders squaring. Rabbit's Ring gave a hard, hot thud against his breastbone; Harry's hand pressed the coat flat as if to quiet the Rod. Harleena didn't look away—she didn't blink—but something in her gaze went colder, deeper. Jack's eyes cut to Harry, and back; the shared unease needed no words.

Nicolas nodded once to Samuel. The big man leaned in, the table shrinking under the weight of him. "It's bigger than a partnership," Samuel rumbled. "He's building to something. There are two of Merrow's old Royal Family still loose. Thirteen are locked in Ironscar." He paused long enough for the names of the prison's walls to creep in around the edges. "If I'm right—and I am—he's going to break them out." The Scale's brass seemed to drink the words and sit heavier. Jack's voice came level, cutting through the bar's distant murmur. "You're sure? That's a hell of a move, even for him." Samuel's dark gaze didn't flicker. "We've watched. Smalls moves, careful ones. Supplies cached near the Hook. Bribes where they count. Ghost-quiet scouts around guard rotations. It points one way."

Jack let that sink in, then turned his attention to the lean youth with the fox-bright eyes. "And you, Billy? What have you been digging into? What's your stake?" Billy's cap brim shadowed his face; when he spoke, his voice had the quick, clipped cadence of someone who thinks faster than he breathes. "The hospital. Dr. Coleman." He darted a glance to the door, then back. "He isn't who he says he is. The man running things now is an impostor." His fingers worried an invisible wire between them. "The real Dr. Coleman's been missing. A while. We've watched him stumble a signature he should've had by heart. We've got records—handwriting, schedule gaps, a wrong habit with his ink. The real one's missing. Whoever's wearing the coat knows enough to fool a desk clerk, not a close look."

Rabbit's fingers stilled on the rim of his glass. "Coleman is the one who cracked Ladher." Billy nodded. "Which means whoever took him has the recipe. If there's a cure, Coleman wrote it

down somewhere. If there isn't…" He let the sentence die. The Scales brightened, a breath of light—and stayed level. Harleena's eyebrow cut upward. "Why does a vanished doctor matter," she asked, knife-calm, "when the city's throat is already to the blade?" Billy didn't flinch. "Because Dr. Coleman—he's the one who discovered Ladher. He knows how it works." He swallowed. "And how to develop an antidote." He let the last word settle, aware of what it meant to dangle hope in a room like this. "Without him, once it's unleashed… there's no stopping it."

The Scale answered with a thin, silvery quiver of light. The pans did not waver. Ezra's glassware whispered behind the bar. Somewhere deeper in the Den a laugh died mid-breath and turned into a cough. Outside, the city dragged a coal-smoked sigh across its teeth. Nicolas unsteepled his fingers. "Then here are our truths," he said quietly. "Ladher is the blade at this city's throat. Merrow and Pennwright are the hands holding it. And Dr. Coleman—who might know how to blunten it—is missing." He let that settle, the bar's murmurs dimming to a distant tide. "Enigma intends to stop Merrow," Nicolas finished, gaze moving from Jack to Harleena to Harry. "We hope you'll cooperate. If you do, we share what we learn as we move. If you don't…" He didn't harden the words; he didn't have to. "We move anyway." The Scale shimmered once more—cool, shadowless—then went quiet.

The Shadow's Den seemed to lean in closer around their table, as though the walls themselves were listening. Candlelight flickered in shallow pools, staining the faces gathered in amber and shadow. The Scale still sat between them, steady and humming faintly, its brass arms holding silence as if it were the most fragile weight in the room. Nicolas's pale eyes cut across the table, finding Jack first. His voice carried the quiet gravity of a man who had lived too long in shadows. "We could use your help. If we're going to save Doskvol from whatever Merrow and Pennwright are planning, we have to act now. It's best if we have your cooperation." Jack didn't answer right away. He leaned back into the worn chair, one hand drumming once against the wood, then going still. The smoke from a nearby table drifted lazily between them, softening his sharp profile, but his eyes remained clear—calculating, narrowing as if weighing invisible coin. "And what do we get in return?" he said finally, voice clipped, the edge of a gambler demanding better odds. "You're asking us to go up against some of the most dangerous people in the city. That's not a small favor."

Nicolas didn't flinch. He glanced at Sheila. She sat poised, the silk of her coat whispering as she shifted, her hand slipping inside. From the folds she drew a folder, thick and bound in twine darkened by oil. When she placed it on the table, the sound was louder than it should've been, like a door shutting. "This is information on the Gloam Sisters," she said. Her voice was calm, crisp, and carried no room for doubt. "We're preparing for a war against them, and you'll find these details useful." Jack leaned forward, the candlelight catching on the faint sheen of sweat at his temple. He untied the folder and flipped it open. Page after page of spidery handwriting, diagrams of wards, lists of names both living and dead. A rough sketch of the Gloam manor stared up at him, windows like blank eyes. His lips curled into the barest smirk, but the light never reached his eyes. "And you, Sheila?" he asked, eyes still on the pages though his voice cut straight to her. "What's your part in all of this?"

The air changed. Nicolas turned his head toward her, and for a long moment neither spoke. Their silence was thick, laden with unspoken calculation. The Scales shimmered faintly in that pause, as if aware of the weight of the choice pressed against them. Nicolas's jaw worked, but he said nothing. Sheila, at last, lifted her chin, her gaze fixed, unflinching. "I'm undercover in the Gloam Sisters' mansion," she said, the words crisp as glass. "Lira Quinval is involved, and I believe she's tied to Merrow's plans. I've been gathering information from the inside, but it's dangerous work." The Scale glowed faintly, its cold light painting their faces. No shadow moved.

Across the table, Harleena's breath caught, too quiet for most to hear but sharp enough to taste the tension it left. Jack's smirk widened, sardonic, though his voice stayed even. "Lira Quinval,

huh?" he said, shutting the folder with a snap. "I've heard of her. Dangerous woman. I'm impressed you've lasted this long undercover." Sheila didn't blink, didn't even flinch. Her pale hands rested steady on the table, every finger still as though even the twitch of a knuckle might betray her. "I can take care of myself," she answered simply. "But if we're going to stop Merrow, we better work together." The Scale gave its faint shimmer again, shadowless, unyielding. The truth lay between them like a blade on the table, daring anyone to test its edge. Harleena's voice slipped in, low and flat. "If you're already inside Lira's house, what do we not know?" Sheila held her stare. "She's pushing past the old limits. The Sisters are stitching beasts again—new patterns, stronger bindings. She's hoarding spirit glass and fresh bodies. And she's not sleeping much." A beat. "She's hunting Merrow. She'll burn the city to get him." Harleena didn't look away. "She would."

Silence pressed in for a breath. Glasses clinked at the bar; somewhere a door latch clicked. Jack leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking under his weight, his eyes narrowing with consideration. Sheila's revelation, the Scale's shimmer, Nicolas's grim tone—they were all threads weaving a noose. He rolled one shoulder as though to shrug off its tightening. "Alright," he said at last, his voice quiet but certain. "We'll help. But only after I've wrapped up my own projects. Once that's done, I'll put my focus on taking down these targets."

The words hung. Every eye flicked, instinctively, to the Scales. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to wait. Then came that faint shimmer—like brass swallowing light—and nothing more. No tilt. No judgment. Just the still, terrible weight of truth. Nicolas's shoulders eased, almost imperceptibly. Relief softened the edges of his expression, though it never touched those pale, restless eyes. "That's fair," he said. His voice carried the exhaustion of a man too used to hearing no. "We all have our own battles to fight, but when the time comes, we'll need you. We're not here to make you soldiers under our flag. Enigma will move with or without you. But this is bigger than turf and grudges. Ladher is not a rumor now. It's a clock. If you know something that cuts time, say it."

From the folds of his coat, he drew out a small black box, no larger than a book. The lacquer gleamed dully in the candlelight, absorbing rather than reflecting. He slid it across the table with slow deliberation. "Here. One more token of good faith. Consider it a gift for what's to come." Jack pulled it closer, the hinges whispering as he opened the lid. Inside, stacked in neat order, lay documents—maps sketched in a precise hand, lists of names, coded ledgers that smelled faintly of wax and ink. The neat chaos of intelligence gathered by someone meticulous enough to risk death for every line. Jack flipped through, his brow furrowing as he caught sight of familiar streets annotated with hidden wards, back doors marked with sigils. He glanced up at Sheila, his smirk returning with the faintest edge of admiration. "Looks like you've been busy."

Sheila's lips curved, but the smile was faint and cold. "You have no idea." Nicolas started to rise, the long sweep of his coat shifting like smoke behind him, but a voice broke through the moment. "Can I say something?" Rabbit's Foot. He sat hunched, his injured arm bandaged but stiff, the lines of fatigue drawn deep into his face. His words cut across the table like a whisper turned weapon. Nicolas paused, nodded once, and every head turned. Rabbit inhaled slowly, his chest rising with the weight of intent. His next words came steady, deliberate. "My name is… erm… Nicole Swearman."

Silence. Every gaze snapped to the Scales. At first, they only shimmered faintly, the same subtle gleam that had accompanied truth all night. But then—one of the brass plates tilted. Just slightly. Downward. As though something unseen had been placed upon it. Heavy. Condemning. The chains groaned softly, though no draft stirred the air. For the first time that evening, the artifact moved. The movement was small. It felt enormous. Sheila's eyes fixed on Rabbit, her calm as sharp as a knife. "I wouldn't test your luck if I were you." Rabbit only smiled, thin and sardonic, as if that single tilt had given him some private satisfaction. He said nothing more.

The group began to disperse after that, the atmosphere broken but heavier for it. Chairs scraped wood, the echoes dull and final. Nicolas gathered his coat around him like armor, his dagger flashing once at his fingers before vanishing again. Samuel rose like a shifting wall, his crowbar clinking against the strap across his chest. Billy disappeared into his too-large jacket, eyes darting to exits before his boots had even left the floorboards. Sheila lingered a moment longer, her hand brushing the Scale before she tucked it once more into her coat—the shimmer dying as though the room itself had exhaled in relief.

The Crows, too, stood. Jack slid the black box under his coat with practiced ease, his eyes never leaving Nicolas until the man was swallowed by the Den's darkness. Harleena's gaze lingered on Sheila, cold but sharpened now with a wary respect. Harry stayed silent, his thoughts buried behind his stare, his hand straying unconsciously toward the hidden weight of the rod under his coat. Jack was the last to speak. His tone was measured, almost casual, but the weight in his words lingered. "Stay alive in that house, Sheila. We'll need you when it breaks." She didn't turn back, but her answer carried, steady as a promise. "I can handle myself." Then they were gone—two crews slipping into different corridors of the same night. The candles on the table guttered and steadied. Ezra polished a glass and watched without watching. Velvet swayed, settled. At the empty place where the Scales had been, no shadow lay.

Chapter 2: **Legitimacy as a Mask**

The Shadow's Den spat them into the fog like a secret it regretted keeping. Lanterns smeared yellow across wet cobbles; the canal's breath smelled of brine and coal. For a moment they hovered under the jut of the Den's awning, four silhouettes in a pocket of guttering light while the street moved past in blurs—porters with hunched backs, a pair of veiled lovers, an Espiritas cart rolling slow with its bell muffled. Jack tipped his chin to the flow of bodies and kept his voice tight. "Power first," he said. "Wards, allies, coin. Without those, we're kindling." Harleena's reply came like a blade pulled halfway from its sheath. "Power is killing Merrow now." She stepped closer to the curb, eyes on the fog as if the man might peel out of it laughing. "Every hour we wait, he writes the city another scar." Harry shifted, hands deep in his coat, scanning the rooflines by reflex. "If we charge him now, the Royal Family eats us," he said, gentle as he could make it. "We've seen what he does to crowds. Imagine that turned on us." Jack nodded once, patient and brutal. "He's built for spectacle. We'd be an opening act." Harleena's gaze slid from one to the other, hardening. "We're not empty-handed. Two Umbral Items between us—more than any faction in this city." The words put a chill in the air. Harry's fingers pressed unconsciously to the coat where the rod slept; Rabbit's jaw flexed, the Ring a steady weight against his breastbone. "And still not enough," Rabbit said, quiet but immovable. "Not blind. Not like this. We need information. Where he is, what he wants next, who's opening his doors." A tram clanged somewhere up the hill; a gull cried as if it had news. The four of them stood in that thin brightness while Doskvol pretended at ordinary. Jack exhaled, fog tearing off his breath. "Then we split. We listen, we watch, we dig. We choose by nightfall and we move together." Harleena held his stare a heartbeat longer, then gave the smallest nod a truce can wear. "Tonight," she said. "No later." Harry glanced once at the canal and back at their faces, as if counting them into luck. "Tonight," he echoed.

They broke like smoke on a draft. Jack pulled his collar up and vanished toward the alleys of Hexspire, maps snug under his arm; Harry peeled off the other way, shoulders hunched against a wind that hadn't bothered to arrive yet. Harleena lingered half a step, eyes still sharp. "You're not coming home?" she asked Rabbit without turning her head. He smiled with one corner of his mouth, the kind that doesn't risk teeth. "I've got a stop first." That earned him a long, measuring look and nothing more; then she was gone, her footfalls swallowed by the city's damp throat. Rabbit stayed under the awning a moment longer, watching lanternlight ripple on the canal like a promise no one intended to keep. Power, Jack had said. Power would help. But as the door's last warmth bled out of his back and the fog took him by the lapels, Rabbit knew what thieves really survived on wasn't just power. It was cover. A name the city could say without choking. A mask with a license stamped on it. Something respectable enough to hide a blade behind. He turned his collar to the cold and set off to find it.

Rabbit's boots clicked steady on the stonework as he cut through Gloamhaven, the city's wealthiest mask pulled tight around itself. The district had its own shine: gas lamps polished and trimmed, their glow fighting the fog with more stubbornness than success. Carriages rolled slow and lacquered, pulled by sleek horses whose hooves struck like punctuation. The air even smelled different here—coal smoke sweetened by perfumes drifting out of parlors, pipe tobacco curling from balconies trimmed with iron lace. Gloamhaven always carried itself like it was Doskvol's spine, upright and important, even as the rot gnawed beneath.

Ahead, the bridge rose—a long arch of black stone, thick chains looped across its rails like the city's own veins. It was less an invitation than a scar: the line between two worlds. On one side, Gloamhaven's neat façades and steam-fed comforts. On the other, the Lost District.

The bridge opened to a sprawl that looked as though it had been built out of desperation instead of design. Roofs leaned into each other at broken angles, tin sheets and rotting planks nailed over gaps that wind and rain never stopped testing. Walls bulged with patchwork repairs—stones scavenged from ruins, shutters stolen from elsewhere, tar smeared in hasty streaks to keep water out. Whole blocks seemed to sag together, houses stacked like drunkards propping one another up, each structure threatening to fall and dragging its neighbors down with it. The midday light didn't help; thick clouds pressed low over the skyline, turning the district into a washed-out sketch where every corner looked smeared with soot. What Gloamhaven tried to perfume away, the Lost District wore openly: rust, salt, garbage, smoke. From a distance, it looked less like a neighborhood and more like a wound the city had bandaged badly and left to fester. Rabbit slowed at the crest of the bridge. From here, he could see the life moving in that maze—children darting barefoot through alleys too narrow for carts, women bent over buckets with water grey from the first rinse, men hunched in doorways with shoulders folded tight against the cold. Even the dogs moved differently here, quick and mean, ribs sharp as knives.

He knew this bridge well. Knew who to expect around this hour. Tobias Ford had a habit of appearing here—always here—when midday pressed the crowd forward and the fog thinned enough for faces to matter. Rabbit didn't need to guess anymore; ever since they met, Tobias's rhythms had been steady as tides. Rabbit leaned his elbows against the black stone rail, eyes scanning the flow of bodies spilling across the bridge. Somewhere in it, Tobias would surface, same as always. Tobias Ford sat slouched on the low stone embankment by the canal, where the black water slid slow and silent beneath the bridge. From here, the city fractured into layers: the leaning roofs and patchwork alleys of the Lost District directly ahead, the sagging streets stitched together by desperation. And farther still, beyond the blur of smoke and crooked chimneys, the faint line of the Deadland woods—a skeletal smear against the gray horizon. The trees looked like bones clawing out of the earth, the kind of place the wind never left, only circled endlessly.

Tobias watched it all with the stillness of a man who had nowhere left to rush to. His shoulders were broad but hunched, the posture of someone who carried weight long after it was set down. His beard was thick, black threaded with the first hints of gray, curled in rough knots as though it hadn't seen a comb in weeks. Dark curls of hair framed his head, wild and ungoverned, catching the faint damp of the fog. His profile was carved in harsh angles—hooked nose, strong jaw, cheekbones sharp beneath weathered skin that spoke of nights in alleys and days under hard skies. The man looked like Doskvol itself: battered, unpolished, but still standing. His eyes—though shadowed from the side—were restless, darting not at the city in front of him but at its reflections rippling in the water. A spy's gaze, always searching for what was half-hidden, never what was shown. A wiry cigarette burned low between his fingers, its ember dim against the midday gray, and each drag drew a shallow glow into the lines of his face.

Beyond the bridge, the woods lay where he had once been trapped—years stolen, mind chained to the curse of a beast. He had defended the Ring there like a hound tied to a master he never knew, swooping and snarling at any who dared near it. Tobias hadn't been a man then, not really—just a vessel of rage and wings, a monster bound to the Umbral's will. Until the Crows came. Until Rabbit, with steady hands and a gambler's nerve, turned the Ring against its own prison and shattered the curse that had hollowed him. Since that night, Tobias had been free. Free in body, though not always in memory. Some shadows don't break. Rabbit saw him now, just as he always did at this hour. Predictable as the tide, Tobias kept his vigil here—half watching the district he'd been freed into, half staring at the woods that once claimed him. Rabbit adjusted the strap of his coat and stepped onto the embankment, the stone slick beneath his boots. He didn't rush the greeting. Instead, he let the quiet of the canal do most of the work, the water carrying the echo of his approach.

“Tobias,” Rabbit called softly, the fog catching his voice and making it smaller. The man turned, profile shifting into full sight. His eyes narrowed, but not in suspicion—recognition, sharpened by something like gratitude that never needed to be spoken. He flicked the last ash of his cigarette into the canal, and a faint smile tugged at his lips, crooked and worn. “Rabbit,” he said, his voice rough, the sound of gravel underfoot. And in that single word was everything Tobias hadn’t said since the curse was broken—thanks, loyalty, and the knowledge that his life was no longer his alone.

The two men lingered by the canal as the muted sounds of Doskvol pressed around them—barge bells clanging in the distance, gulls circling in the gray sky, boots clattering faintly across the bridge overhead. The fog swirled like smoke between them, and at first their words were light, small talk about the weather, about how the Lost District always looked dirtier in midday than at night, about Ezra’s watered whiskey back at the Den. But the easy chatter couldn’t hold. Tobias’s eyes, sharp and restless, flicked back to Rabbit, studying him like a code waiting to be cracked. Finally, Tobias exhaled through his nose and leaned back on his palms, his voice low and rough. “Rabbit, you’re not here for talk. You’re here because you need me again, huh?”

Rabbit’s Foot hesitated only long enough to draw a steadying breath. “You’re right.” His tone carried none of the usual slyness—only the flat honesty of a man placing cards on the table. “I’ve been investigating the area around the Crimson Chemical Plant. It’s a prime location between Hexspire and Night Market. Perfect for expansion.” That earned Tobias’s attention. His head tilted slightly, curls catching the fog, eyes narrowing with calculation. “The Crimson Chemical Plant? That place is notorious. Nobody touches it. Why there?” Rabbit’s gaze drifted past the canal toward the sprawl of ramshackle roofs in the Lost District. His jaw worked once before he answered. “Because it was a stomping ground for Merrow. He liked to haunt that part of the city. I want us to have a foothold there, some influence in the places he thought were his.” Tobias’s laugh was short, more breath than sound. “What’s so interesting about that man? Merrow’s a ghost in half this city already.”

“I’ve been digging into him,” Rabbit said, his voice lowering, as though even the fog might carry it away to listening ears. “Merrow leaves marks wherever he walks. He’s not gone. Not yet. And if we don’t plant ourselves in his shadow before he returns, we’ll always be behind him.” Tobias’s eyes cut to him with sharp humor. “If it’s about places Merrow touched, then you’re already living in one. That house of yours in Crow’s Ward? He used to linger around it a lot. Especially that block.” Rabbit didn’t flinch. His lips twitched, something between a smirk and a grimace. “I already knew that.” That answer made Tobias pause. He studied Rabbit longer, letting the silence stretch until the canal itself seemed to lean in. “What else are you hiding from me, Rabbit?” Rabbit’s eyes finally met his, steady as stone. “Do you trust me?” There was no hesitation in Tobias’s reply. His voice was gravel, plain and sure. “Yes. With my life.”

The two men let the fog do the talking for a while—river breath rolling in from the canal, the bridge above them humming with cart wheels and tired feet. Tobias sat half-turned to the water, profile cut in charcoal against the pale noon. He worried a match between his fingers, not lighting it, just turning it, the way a man turns a problem. Rabbit stayed standing, one shoulder to the rail, the wind teasing the edge of the bandage under his coat. His eyes kept slipping to the Lost District’s stacked roofs—patched tin, scavenged planks, laundry lines like tired pennants—then back to Tobias as if measuring whether the man matched the measure of the task. “I’ll tell you some things,” Rabbit said at last, voice low and even. “Not everything. Not because I don’t trust you—because some of it doesn’t make sense yet. But this much is clear: Merrow needs to be stopped. He’s out there in the shadows with a weapon that erases rooms, and—apparently—fate wants the Crows standing in the doorway.”

Tobias snorted, dry as grit. “Faith can suck my ass.” The match snapped clean between his fingers. He flicked the pieces into the canal, watched the ripples go nowhere, then looked back up. “Go on.”

“I walked the Crimson Chemical Plant again,” Rabbit continued. “It’s an imposing relic—brick like old bruises, windows soldered with grime. The air’s thick with industrial ghosting, and somewhere inside the pipes still talk to themselves. But the ground around it… that’s the part that matters. Between Hexspire and Nightmarket, out of the nobility’s sightlines and inside a dozen trade routes. Right under everyone’s noses.” Tobias’s eyebrow climbed. “No one wants it because it’s dangerous. Acid pits, old claims, men who vanished on inventory night. What makes you think we can turn that around?” A slice of mischief touched Rabbit’s eyes, quick and gone. “Because it’s dangerous. Because the brave left their marks and the careful left their exits. I found graffiti that isn’t for show, tunnels someone meant to return to, and the bones of a headquarters that didn’t die with its owners. It’s a goldmine if you know which seams to leave alone.” Tobias leaned in, elbows on knees, the old spy awake behind his gaze. “You trust me to secure a building there?”

“I need you to make it happen,” Rabbit said, and the need stripped any ornament from his tone. “Not another thieves’ den. A legitimate front—a hotel. Beds that change no questions into coin, a lobby that invites auditors to get bored, kitchens that receive crates nobody opens, and cellars that breathe into the tunnels. We clean the surface, we keep the real work quiet.” Tobias studied him, then the district, then him again—reading posture, breath, the way Rabbit kept one hand near his ribs like pain and prudence were sharing a chair. “Alright,” he said. “If we’re flying honest colors on paper, we’ll need a story that eats scrutiny. A holding company with a respectable name. A lease or purchase recorded at Ashmere Hall, permits from the Canal Authority and Fire Brigade, and an inspector we can live with. ‘Facilitation fees’ for the right desks. Who’s our patron of record?”

“No names anyone can trace back to us,” Rabbit answered. “Use a blind trust through a Ashmere Hall solicitor who owes us—keep the beneficiaries sealed. Approach Governor Daava if you must, but something’s off with him lately. Better to start with his deputy and the clerk who actually stamps deeds. Keep our fingerprints off. If Harleena asks, this is about power, and she’s right—but not the kind you wave around. The kind that sits still and survives audits.” Tobias tipped his chin toward Crow’s Ward, a corner-smile cutting through the beard. “If mapping Merrow’s old haunts is the game, you already know your current house is one of them. He used to circle that block like a dog that hadn’t picked a spot.”

“I know. Then here’s the spend,” Rabbit replied. “You secure the site. You wear the suit. You make the case this hotel brings jobs, patrols, tax, and less smuggling than the plant used to. You suggest a small, civilized ‘expedite’ to the right ledger. You don’t mention the Crows. You don’t mention me. If anyone asks who you represent, you represent a fund with a taste for real estate nobody loves until it pays.” He glanced back toward the chemical stacks, then returned to Tobias. “Get us canal access and salvage rights in the sublevels. I want the tunnels and the river both. If you can swing an exemption on certain fire codes for ‘historic preservation,’ do it—we’ll need the hidden doors to stay hidden.”

Tobias rose, rolling his shoulders under the worn coat, something like purpose settling on him like a weight that fit. “Budget?” Rabbit shook his head, not reaching for his coat this time. “Stop by the house before you set off. I’ll have something for you there.” Tobias studied him, eyes narrowing just a fraction. “And where exactly did you get the capital for this little venture?” A ghost of a smile touched Rabbit’s face, though it carried no warmth. “Some of our latest endeavors have been… lucrative.” He left it at that, the kind of answer that dared further questions while making clear they’d never be answered. Tobias held his stare a moment longer, then gave a short nod. “Fine. I won’t ask again.” He leaned back, folding his arms. “Timeline?”

“Fast enough that we look decisive,” Rabbit said. “Slow enough that no one asks why. Start with a survey and a tea with the deputy’s assistant. By tonight, I want either a meeting on the books or a reason we burn the plan and pick another street.” Tobias’s mouth tugged toward a grin, old mischief returning. “A hotel, then. With rooms for saints, sinners, and paperwork.”

“And a cellar for truths,” Rabbit said. He offered his hand. Tobias took it, their grips brief and hard—spy and thief, plan stitched between them. Then Tobias set off toward Ashmere Hall, already walking like a man wearing a better coat, and Rabbit leaned on the rail a heartbeat longer, watching the boundary between districts blur in the noon fog. Power wasn’t the only thing a crew like theirs needed. Legitimacy could be armor too. Tobias considered the proposal, rubbing at the curl of his beard as if the answer might be hiding in it. “I’ll need to talk to Governor Cross Daava. Convince him there’s something worth salvaging in that ruin. Buying or renting—doesn’t matter. It’ll have to be clean, above board. A legal acquisition.”

“Make it happen, Tobias,” Rabbit said, his tone clipped but steady, as if the words themselves carried weight enough to seal the deal. “I trust you.” Tobias gave a low grunt of assent, the sound roughened by smoke and memory. “I won’t let you down, Rabbit. I’ll secure that building.” Rabbit leaned back against the rail, letting the fog curl around them like the city’s own eavesdropper. “One more thing,” he said, casual in voice but sharp in the eyes. Tobias narrowed his gaze. “What you’re already asking is too much.” Rabbit’s smile spread slow, sly, the kind that never quite reached his scarred cheek. “All the more reason, then. When it’s done, I’ll need someone I trust to run it. Someone who knows how to move in shadows but still wear a clean face.” For a moment Tobias was silent, staring past Rabbit to the canal where the water caught pale light like old glass. The words settled heavy in him, heavier than the pouch he’d refused earlier. “You’d give me that?” he asked, voice low, stripped of his usual armor.

Rabbit shrugged, grin crooked. “You haven’t exactly been busy lately. So what do you say? Can I count on you?” The old spy gave a short laugh, bitter but touched with something dangerously close to gratitude. “Yeah,” Tobias said finally. “You can count on me.” His thoughts began to run ahead of his words, unspooling plans in the way only men with too much history in deception could. He remembered nights as a spy before the curse, when his tongue was his sharpest blade and the wrong slip could end in chains. Approaching Governor Cross Daava would demand the same balance of charm and menace—too much honey and the Governor would suspect, too much knife and he’d close his doors. Tobias would have to wear a mask of legitimacy so tight it didn’t crack. “The Governor will want to see profit,” Tobias muttered, half to himself. His eyes traced the gray edge of the canal, seeing numbers instead of ripples. “I’ll talk jobs. Growth. Clean coin where he can skim without dirtying his shoes. Maybe even hint at a facilitation fee.” The words were flat, practical, but his mind already weighed every syllable.

As the two parted and Tobias moved off into the fog, the city bent around his thoughts. Each lamp along the street seemed to mark another step in the plan: an appointment, an introduction, a contract signed with ink that would hide blood beneath it. The coins Rabbit promised would be seed enough to sprout a new story, if Tobias played the part convincingly. The trick was ensuring the Governor saw only what Tobias wanted him to see—an eager investor with a vision, not a Crow with dirt under his nails.

Three days later, Tobias Ford climbed Gloamhaven’s hill with fog at his back and a plan in his pocket. The Governor’s mansion rose out of the clean light like a contradiction—white stone scrubbed of soot, ironwork polished to a mirror, hedges clipped so tightly they might bleed. He’d spent the last seventy-two hours the way real doors are opened in Doskvol: a quiet word with a Gloamhaven solicitor who kept two sets of books; a velvet envelope for a Ashmere Hall clerk who controlled appointment ledgers; a polite “donation” to a footman who knew which

names were moved to the top when coin spoke. He'd let certain rumors do the rest—Tobias Ford, comfortably flush and fashionably bored, a man hunting for someplace to park too much money and not enough interests. By the time his name reached Cross Daava's desk, the schedule adjusted itself. The mansion gates were a geometry of black steel and gold leaf. Two guards in Imperial blue watched him approach—faces shaved to obedience, hands resting on batons that said this neighborhood had never learned to be afraid. Tobias made himself taller by a breath, shoulders loose, chin easy: the posture of a gentleman investor who pays men to worry for him.

"I'm here to see Governor Cross Daava," he said, voice pitched to glide. "Appointment. Proposal with civic upside." They traded the small look gatekeepers trade—skepticism softened by the possibility of a tip—then checked the board in its brass case. The latch clicked. The gates sighed open. Inside, wealth had a smell. Beeswax and old paper; leather and rain-soaked wool steaming gently near the vestibule stove. Chandeliers—whale oil and something newer humming faintly—cast a proper daylight that Gloamhaven preferred to the city's honest dusk. Tobias's boots found hush on thick carpet runners; portraits followed him down the corridor with that elite gaze that measures men by what they can be made to pay. He let himself be measured. As a steward guided him deeper—gloved hand indicating marble, mahogany, magnificence—Tobias rehearsed the edges of his pitch the way a knife-fighter tests a blade. Crimson Chemical Plant would never cross his lips; it would be Crimson Works Redevelopment—sanitation, reclamation, taxable revenue. Jobs for the right voters. A hotel and baths to "invite patronage" from the Gloamhaven set. City risk insulated; private capital bearing liability. A philanthropic garnish: detoxifying a blighted site for the health of Doskvol's children. And if the Governor preferred plain speech, there was a quieter paragraph about facilitation fees and the soft power of a plaque with the right names carved on it.

He'd built himself a scaffold of legitimacy to climb: letters of credit from a discreet banker in Gloamhaven; a shell company with a reassuringly dull name—Frostbridge Holdings—inked into Ashmere Hall's registry; a civil engineer's survey rolled under his arm and tied with twine. On a separate sheet, tucked flat to his ribs, were the roads he would never show: back-channel estimates for bribes, contractor names with knives in their smiles, and the Crows' private ingress points penciled in a hand that wasn't his. They passed a tall casement where the city lay framed below—smokestacks breaking the horizon like black teeth, the river a pewter ribbon. Out there, the Crimson Works crouched between Hexspire and Nightmarket, coughing rust into the canal. Here, the floor shone keen enough to shave in. Doskvol's two faces, stitched by a hill.

The steward stopped at a set of double doors banded in brass. "Wait here," he murmured. "The Governor is concluding other business." His voice carried that Gloamhaven softness that can turn cruel without changing volume. Tobias nodded, palms flat on his portfolio to keep them from drumming. He let his breath settle into the cadence of the room. A clock somewhere off to the left ticked with aristocratic patience. A clerk in a side alcove sanded a signature, eyes glazed with the peculiar exhaustion of men who file wealth for a living. A pair of junior officers passed at the far end of the corridor, whispering names Tobias pretended not to hear. He set his mouth in the small, agreeable smile of a man who expected to be agreed with. When the doors opened, a draught of warmer air carried a mix of ink, brandy, and the faintest metallic tang—like a penny set on the tongue. The steward's glove lifted. "Governor Cross Daava will see you now." Tobias squared his shoulders, felt the weight of coin and lies settle into harmony, and stepped through.

Governor Cross Daava's office smelled of old books and fresh brandy, a chamber cluttered with the detritus of both power and fatigue. Papers stacked like tired soldiers leaned against one another on his desk, ink stains blotting the margins where hurried notes bled into orders. A map of the city, edges curling from damp, was tacked behind him, colored pins marking trouble spots like a rash spreading across Doskvol's skin.

When Tobias entered, Daava looked up as though startled from a heavier thought, his thinning hair clinging damply to his brow. The man's suit was fine, but its collar had wilted under the sweat of his own nerves. Still, he tried a politician's smile. "Ah, Mr. Ford, please—take a seat."

Tobias crossed the rug slowly, allowing confidence to show in the set of his shoulders. He extended a hand, his grip firm and steady, swallowing the governor's clammy one without pause. "Governor Daava, thank you for granting me this audience on such short notice."

"Of course, of course," Daava murmured, withdrawing as if embarrassed by the limpness of his shake. "What can I do for you?"

Tobias eased into the chair across the desk, laying his portfolio on his lap with the casualness of a man who had rehearsed his entrance down to the blink. His voice was even, urbane. "I've recently taken an interest in Doskvol's potential for growth. Not just Gloamhaven or Ashmere Hall, which shine brightly enough already, but those districts that have… been left behind. In particular, the span of land between Hexspire and Night Market. A zone too valuable to be abandoned, too central to stay in ruin."

Daava's eyebrows rose. His mouth tugged downward into a doubtful line. "That area?" He chuckled dryly, though there was no humor in it. "It's… challenging, Mr. Ford. Infested with squatters and gangs. Most days, the police won't even walk the perimeters without reinforcements. What makes you think it's a worthwhile investment?"

Tobias leaned forward, the faint gleam of his cufflink catching a sliver of the lamplight. His eyes locked onto Daava's, sharp but warm, like a man cutting cloth rather than flesh. "Challenges, Governor, are opportunities in disguise. That ground has been poisoned by neglect, yes—but precisely because it has been overlooked, it is ripe for transformation. With the right vision and capital, that place could be reborn. My plan is simple: a hotel. A legitimate establishment, one to draw not only visitors, but coin. With businesses clustering around it, trade follows. With trade comes employment. Employment brings order. Prosperity breeds loyalty."

Daava sank back into his chair, expression clouded. He rubbed his temples with two fingers, a gesture that betrayed the weight of more than one sleepless night. "A hotel," he echoed, voice low. "In the very corridor the gangs use as a battlefield. The Ember Circle one week, these… Crows the next. Add to that the kidnappings, the monsters crawling at the edge of the districts, the train robbery that still has the papers baying for blood…" He exhaled, long and sharp. "Every day, the public holds me accountable for the city's decay. My approval has never been weaker. You ask me to gamble what little faith remains on a project that could fail before its doors even open."

Tobias inclined his head, sympathy writ in his smile without ever softening his eyes. "I do not ask you to gamble, Governor. I ask you to claim victory where none believe it possible. This project isn't only bricks and mortar—it is a message. That you will not allow rot to spread unchecked. That you will invest in the future of Doskvol, not simply guard its past. The people need something they can see with their own eyes, something that breathes promise instead of excuses."

Daava's fingers stilled against his brow. He stared at Tobias a long while, weighing his words, before sighing once more. "It is… tempting. But risky. And make no mistake—" he gestured vaguely at the piles of ledgers and petitions that smothered his desk "—the cost of such land, even abandoned, even cursed by rumor, would be no trifle."

The Governor leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers, his expression caught between fatigue and curiosity. His eyes flickered with a spark that had been absent when Tobias first entered. "You make a compelling case, Mr. Ford. But you must understand—every move I make

is weighed, dissected, twisted by rivals. The upcoming election is closer than I'd like. I need something visible, something undeniable, to show the people I can drag this city back from the edge. A single misstep and the wolves will strip me bare."

Tobias tilted his head, studying the man with quiet calculation. Then he leaned forward, voice dropping until it was almost intimate, the tone of a man who had spoken these words before in darker alleys with sharper knives. "Of course. Smooth transactions often require… facilitation. I'm not here to waste your time, Governor. I'm prepared to ensure that all parties—yourself included—benefit from this arrangement. A generous fee to expedite the process and guarantee the paperwork finds its way to the top of the stack."

The word hung between them. Daava's brow furrowed, but he didn't recoil. His eyes widened just slightly, betraying the flicker of interest he couldn't quite mask. He shifted in his chair, the leather sighing under his weight, and nodded once—slowly, as though acknowledging something he could never write down. "This… this could work," he admitted at last, his voice hushed. "But I need to be sure, Mr. Ford. A promise is not enough. My enemies will seize on this the moment they scent weakness. If I put my name to this, the plans must be more than dreams. They must look inevitable."

Tobias rose smoothly, his coat falling in a dark sweep around him, every movement measured to radiate assurance. He extended his hand again, the smile on his lips polite, but the steel in his eyes unmistakable. "Governor, I assure you, inevitability is exactly what I'm offering. This project will not only secure votes—it will stand as a turning point for Doskvol itself. Let's finalise the details, and together we'll make it happen."

Daava hesitated for the span of a heartbeat, then stood as well. His hand met Tobias's, and this time the grip had strength in it, a politician reminded for just a moment what resolve felt like. "Very well," he said. "We'll continue this discussion. Bring me concrete plans. Numbers, drawings, contracts I can wave before the papers. Do that, and I'll stand behind you."

Tobias inclined his head with just the right note of deference. "You'll have them soon, Governor. Thank you for your time—and your trust."

As he stepped out into the hall, the muffled tick of the great clock filling the silence around him, Tobias's mind was already racing ahead. He had cracked the door open, now came the harder work of forcing it wide. He would need plans, forged legitimacy, and the right hands greased in the right order. It was dangerous—but so was doing nothing. By the time he reached the outer gates and the grey daylight of Doskvol pressed against him once more, he already knew the next step: back to Rabbit's Foot, back to the Crows, to set the pieces in motion.

The negotiation was far from finished, but the seed had been planted. And if it grew, the area would be practically theirs—a foothold hidden in plain sight, and one more brick laid in the wall against Merrow's coming storm.

Story: Running from Fire

At the Iron Den

Cuzão was on the cracked tile of the old orphanage kitchen floor, pushing a tin soldier along a chalk road he'd drawn for Luis and Nico—the young twins in mismatched boots who laughed with mouths too big for their faces—when the day turned, just like that. Ulric Stoneborn, fifteen and wearing a coat two sizes too large like a throne he'd grow into, was in the doorway counting heads. Dadinho was whittling a stick into something that wanted to be a spear. Boquinha had a lock's guts spread on a plate and was teaching the littles how to keep a door honest. The orphanage—abandoned by good intentions, retaken by kids with grit—smelled of boiled cabbage, soap, and a pan trying not to burn. The walls were scabbed with old prayers and newer graffiti; the chapel's busted saints watched with their stone eyes; the iron beds squealed when anyone turned; and the cold seeped through the boards like a rumor. Then the crackle Cuzão first thought was the bad pan spat again—hotter, wrong. Smoke threaded the ceiling low and oily, and the window beside the weapons alcove burst inward with a mean pop, glass and flame arriving together as men in heavy, blackened coats pushed through the broken mouth, masks blanking their faces, copper nozzles glinting. The first jet of fire wrote a bright scream across the hallway, rugs blooming into animal heat, and what had been a home began to taste like a kiln.

Ulric moved first—of course he did—barking orders like he'd been born with a sergeant in his chest: "Windows! Buckets! Littles to the cellar—NOW." One hand yanked a crying kid by the collar toward the back while the other shoved a bar into Dadinho's palm. Dadinho set his jaw and ran toward the heat like a fool hero. Boquinha swept the lock pieces into a rag with neat fury and dragged a girl with him by the wrist. The twins squealed because the chalk city had turned into a real one and now it was on fire. The men laughed behind their masks—a thin sound, like knives tapping glass—and swept their flame along the walls where sleeping blankets hung, tinder made of tired cloth and hope.

Cuzão's heart went feral. He yanked Luis and Nico behind his back, shoved them under the long table—"stay-stay-stay"—and ducked as another burst of fire roared, hair crisping, eyebrows singing, skin going tight and shiny on one cheek. The heat made thoughts flutter, then snap—run. But the hall was already a tunnel of light and smoke, the painted saints on the chapel wall blurring and weeping soot. Somewhere Ulric shouted, "Left passage—left!" and somewhere else Dadinho cursed at a man who answered by raking the nozzle across a row of hooks where coats caught like torches. Boquinha yelped as his sleeve smoked. A toddler wailed inside a room filling with yellow breath.

Cuzão swallowed a cough that clawed his throat raw, grabbed the twins by their collars, shoved them toward the cellar hatch where older kids were heaving planks aside with desperate strength—then spun, because a masked brute had stepped on a rag doll and ground it into the boards with his heel. The brute turned the nozzle toward Cuzão almost lazily—enjoying this, playing—and the jet hammered the wall inches from his head, paint blistering, the air going to knives.

Cuzão threw himself sideways, slammed shoulder-first into the doorframe hard enough to pop white in his eyes, fell, crawled on knees that skinned open, teeth finding copper in his mouth. He smelled kerosene and scorched hair and fear and the rubber stink of the men's suits, heard Ulric hawk a cough and still keep counting—"nine, ten—move—MOVE." He heard Dadinho's voice break on a scream that he turned into a laugh because that's what he did. He heard Boquinha yank a latch and shriek, "This way!" The flames licked at the ceiling like tongues.

Cuzão staggered, slammed his palm on the hidden panel they'd sworn to use only if the world ended, felt the hot iron bite his skin as it slid, and squeezed into the narrow black throat of the escape tunnel as if the building were swallowing him. He went blind there, heat at his back, splinters in his palms, the low ceiling raking his shoulders, voices behind him turning into static and then

muffled bumps like fists on a coffin. The tunnel bent, dipped, rose, and the cool slap of outside air hit his face like a mercy he hadn't earned.

He stumbled into the alley, gagged, spat black, ran. He ran like his bones were springs wound too tight, feet slapping puddles that flashed firelight, lungs clawing, vision narrowed to a long, mean thread. He cut corners he knew and ones he didn't, the city becoming a smear of brick and shadow and lantern halos, while behind his ribs a tally kept naming names—Ulric, Dadinho, Boquinha, Luis, Nico, the littles with the big coats and the bigger eyes—and every step he took added a new piece of the word coward unless he brought back help.

He chose the only help that had ever kept a promise to him, the only adults who'd ever made his pain matter: Crows—Crows—Crows. He could see the belly of the district tilt toward the street where their secret door hid in plain sight among ordinary doors, but when he arrived the panic hit like a fist. Rows of windows. Which house? Which house? Which? His breath sawed and failed. He had only one kind of shout left. He yanked two grenades from his belt with fingers trembling hard enough to drop them, found the pins by feel, tore, tossed both into a tin bin half full of wet paper and street scum, and turned his face away as the world kicked him in the chest.

The blast slapped the houses, blew soot into the air, sent a hot ring of pain around his ears, and threw smoldering trash like sparks of another, smaller hell. Neighbors screamed, doors banged open, silhouettes poured into the lane with curses and confusion. Somebody yelled for the Espiritas. A dog went mad. Smoke clawed the sky like a signal flare for gods who didn't listen. Cuzão stood in the middle of that chaos, swaying, blood and soot painting his face, eyes scanning every doorway like they were cards he could force to turn up right, and he begged inside his skull the only prayer he had left—see me, please see me, please—because if the Crows didn't walk out of one of these doors now, the fire would finish the names he'd been counting, and they'd all be smoke before the city knew what it had allowed.

Chapter 3: **Flames of Desperation - Part 1**

Meanwhile, in a house at Crow's Ward.

Jack stalked the length of the basement like a man pacing the edge of a knife. The hospital the Crows had built under their house didn't smell like safety—it smelled like bleach, boiled rags, and fear disguised as antiseptic. Gaslight bulbs buzzed overhead, their glow as tired as the faces stretched out on the cots. Dr. Lazarus Finch bent over a boy's broken arm, hands steady, spectacles slipping down his nose. Mich, his unnerving shadow, hummed tunelessly as he bled a syringe of air, the needle flashing.

"We're running low on supplies, Doc," Jack muttered, breaking his own rhythm to stop by Finch's table. His voice carried the strain of someone doing arithmetic with debts, not patients. "Bandages, electroplasm, tinctures—you name it. If we don't start pulling in more coin, we'll run this place into the ground before it saves anyone."

Finch didn't even glance up. "We'll manage. We always do. This city bleeds more than it heals—means there'll always be work."

Mich chuckled softly, a sound that made the air crawl. "And there's always something lying around to stitch a man back together. If you know where to look." His grin widened, too pleased at the thought.

Jack turned away, jaw tight. He hated how right they were. The loot from the train heist had kept them afloat, yes—but only for now. They'd moved it fast, stripped it into coin, kept the Crows breathing. But Rabbit Foot had taken a fat slice aside, calling it "a necessary investment" with that sly glimmer in his eye. Said it would be good for them in the long run. Jack wanted to believe him. Needed to. Still, the weight of a crew and a hospital pressed heavier than any smuggled ledger or stolen box of jewels.

He rubbed at his temple, thinking of Merrow, of Ladher, of the shadows that seemed to swell with every passing night. He thought of Harleena, ready to throw herself at Merrow with fire in her fists. Thought of Rabbit, who always had another scheme folded under his coat. Thought of Harry, struggling to squeeze more power out of magic that resisted him. And thought of himself—caught in the middle, forced to keep coin flowing while the city threatened to burn.

Upstairs, Harleena drove her fists into the worn canvas bag like it was the only thing in Doskvol willing to take a beating and not bite back. The thud-thud-thud of her gloves echoed down the hall, a rhythm more like artillery than exercise. Sweat darkened the edges of her shirt, her arms corded with effort, her breath cutting in sharp bursts. She wasn't training to keep fit; she was training because if she stopped, the noise of her head would catch up. "This city's getting worse," she muttered between strikes, the words timed to her punches. "Every alley's a trap, every faction sharpening knives. Sooner or later, we're gonna hit something bigger than we can handle." She caught the bag with both hands, holding it still, her forehead pressed against the canvas as if to bleed her thoughts into it. Her knuckles stung, but that was good. Pain meant she was still here. "I need to get stronger. Can't let anyone take us down. Not Merrow, not the Sisters, not anyone." The bag swayed gently, like it had heard her oath and believed.

Down the hall, Harry sat hunched over his desk, surrounded by the debris of a mind clawing for power and coming up empty. Books lay open in teetering stacks, some so old the spines bled dust when he touched them, others new enough to smell of fresh glue but still stubborn as

stone. A candle guttered beside him, wax crawling down its side like a slow ruin. He muttered the same incantation for the fifth time, low and quick, his hand tracing symbols that fizzled out the moment he finished them. A spark, then nothing. A whisper of magic, then silence. He dropped the chalk with a clatter, shoved both hands through his hair, and let out a sharp breath. “I’m still not strong enough,” he hissed, barely above a whisper. His reflection in the window glared back at him—messy-haired, hollow-eyed, desperate. “I should be able to do more. Jack needs me. Harleena’s already half-killing herself for this crew. Rabbit’s scheming gods know what. And me? I’m—” His throat tightened, the words sticking like a stone. “I’m holding us back.” He shut his eyes and tried to feel it—the pulse of the arcane, the thing the book promised and never gave. It danced at the edge of his reach, mocking, and slipped away. His fingers curled into fists, nails biting his palms, and for a heartbeat he wanted to throw the book across the room. But he didn’t. He just stared at the words, heart hammering, convinced the power was there, buried, if only he could bleed enough of himself to unlock it.

Rabbit Foot sat hunched at his makeshift desk in the corner of the living room, the wood bowed under the weight of scattered papers, half-finished ledgers, and notes scrawled in his quick, slanted hand. The figures blurred if he stared too long, and he knew he should’ve been double-checking the columns, keeping track of coin in and coin out, or revisiting the dossiers he’d been building on the Royal Family—their movements, their safehouses, the way Merrow’s shadow bent around the city like smoke. But his pen had stopped, left to dry on its edge. His attention kept drifting downward to the small shape curled at his boots. The cat had wandered in without invitation, scruffy as gutter weeds, fur patchy, one ear bent, eyes a strange yellow-green that always seemed to be watching more than a cat should. Rabbit had noticed it first outside the Crimson Chemical Plant. The damn thing had followed him then, darting in and out of the fog, tail twitching whenever he lingered too long at the rusted gates. He hadn’t thought much of it until the creature turned up here, slipping through the door like it belonged, padding after him from room to room. Always watching. Always there.

Rabbit had never been a cat person—dogs maybe, back when the world was smaller and his pockets lighter—but something about this one was different. It didn’t beg for scraps, didn’t flinch at loud noises, didn’t even seem to care when Harleena slammed her fists into the bag upstairs or when Jack barked orders like he was carving them into stone. It just watched, like it knew a joke nobody else had heard. Rabbit bent down, scratching it absently behind the ears, and the thing purred low, like a rumble buried under the floorboards. A smile tugged at Rabbit’s mouth, small and crooked, but real. “Well, it could be worse, huh?” he muttered, voice low enough that it felt like a secret meant only for the cat. “Luck’s been on our side so far. Just gotta trust it’ll keep rolling that way.” The cat blinked at him, slow, unhurried, like it was agreeing—or mocking. Rabbit couldn’t tell which, and maybe that was what he liked. He leaned back in his chair, eyes flicking toward the stack of notes on Merrow, then to the half-empty ledger, then back to the animal. His crew was chasing power, coin, vengeance. But sitting here, scratching behind a stray’s torn ear, Rabbit found himself thinking that sometimes survival came down to smaller things. Coin could vanish. Power could burn. But luck—luck was fickle, yes, but it was the one thing he had always known how to court. And now, in the quiet of the house, with the weight of coming storms pressing at the windows, it almost felt like luck had chosen him back.

The quiet was suddenly ripped apart by a deafening explosion outside, the kind that seemed to punch the air out of the walls themselves. The entire house shuddered like it might fold in on its own bones, dust pouring from the ceiling in thin gray veils as crockery rattled and a gas lamp flickered close to dying. Jack froze mid-step in the basement corridor, heart leaping into his throat. For half a beat he thought it was in the house—then the sound registered as coming from the street. His jaw tightened, voice sharp enough to cut. “What the hell was that?” he snarled, already barreling toward the stairs two at a time, coat snapping behind him.

Above, Harleena burst out of her room, fists still wrapped from her training, knuckles already white. Her eyes were hard, scanning the windows, the ceiling, every shadow for movement. “An attack? Someone found us?” she hissed, half a question, half a dare. The smell of her own sweat mingled now with the tang of smoke filtering through the shutters.

In his cluttered room, Harry shoved his spellbook aside so hard it hit the floor with a dull slap. His hands trembled, half-reaching for the scattered notes around him, lips moving with half-formed incantations that never made it out. His heart stammered in his chest. “That sounded close… too close,” he muttered, and in his head a darker thought whispered: *I’m not ready, not if it’s him, not if it’s now.*

In the living room, Rabbit Foot rose slowly from his chair, papers sliding off the desk in a scatter. His usual calm expression cracked, just for a flicker, as the reverberation seemed to crawl through his ribs and settle there. He glanced down at the scruffy cat, now arched and hissing, ears flat, as though it knew more than it should. Rabbit’s voice was quiet but firm, steadying himself as much as the others. “Stay cool. Whatever it is, we’ll handle it.”

The four of them converged fast, steps thundering toward the door in unison. The two enforcers Rabbit had on payroll were already ahead of them, storming past with weapons drawn, faces taut with the readiness of men paid to expect the worst.

When the Crows threw the front door open, the street hit them like another shockwave—smoke in their throats, cinders prickling the air. Two houses down, a trash bin was engulfed, flames chewing upward with a hungry roar, its metal skin buckling under the heat. The acrid stench of burning refuse tangled with gunpowder, sour and chemical, painting the back of their throats raw. Neighbors were spilling into the lane, shouting, pointing, half-panicked silhouettes moving in the orange glow. The remnants of the explosion still smoldered, hissing in the wet gutters.

The smoke parts and there he is—a small, hunched figure beside the burning bin, more soot than skin, a boy barely twelve, with torn sleeves and one shoe gone, the other laced with string. Blood has matted his hair into dark spikes and runs in a thin line from brow to jaw, mixing with grime so his face looks painted for war by a careless hand. His chest heaves too fast, like his ribs forgot how to hold air, and his eyes skid up and down the street in panicked jerks, hunting for a face he knows before the world closes on him again.

“It’s Cuzão,” Rabbit says under his breath—soft, certain—“one of the Stoneborn kids from the balloon race.” The words put a cold weight in all their guts, because that race ended in screams and stitches. Jack moves first, boots slow on wet cobbles, hands open, the way you approach a skittish dog or a wounded friend—never taking his eyes off the boy, never giving the chaos behind him a chance to steal focus.

“Cuzão?” Jack calls, voice level but edged. “What the hell are you doing here?” The name snaps the kid’s head around like a rope yanked—recognition flares hot and desperate in his wide eyes, and he stumbles forward on scraped palms.

“Jack! Jack! Thank the gods it’s you!” he gasps, words tumbling out in a rush that trips on itself. “I didn’t know where you lived, I had to—I had to do something, I needed to get your attention! We’re under attack, Jack! My crew, Ulric Stoneborn, all of us, they’re—” He breaks off, choking on smoke and fear, then tries again, voice cracking. “They’ve got these guns—these guns that shoot fire! Fire! They’re burning everything!”

Harleena ghosts up at Jack’s shoulder, sweat-dark hair stuck to her temple, eyes flicking from the boy’s burns to the pattern of scorch on the bin like she can map the fight from heat alone. She slices Jack a look that says *say more, fast,* then to the kid—softening nothing—“Guns that shoot fire?” incredulous, razor-flat. “What are you talking about, kid?”

But Cuzão is past questions. His words pour out like a dam let go: “I barely made it out, they’re killing my friends, all of them! I thought I was dead, but I ran—ran as fast as I could to find you! I don’t know who else to ask! You’ve gotta help us! Please!”

While he begs, neighbors crowd the lane in nightshirts and boots. The two hired enforcers fan out to either end with weapons high and eyes mean. Harry hovers a half-step back, fingers digging crescents into his palms, mind snapping through spells he knows won’t be enough if this is what he thinks it is. Rabbit drops to a crouch level with Cuzão’s stare, taking in the blister on one cheek, the black around his nostrils, the tremor in his forearms that never stops—cataloguing the damage the way a man counts cards mid-hand.

The heat off the bin licks their shins, the air tastes of kerosene and sour trash, and somewhere far off an Espiritas bell starts that muffled, relentless toll that means somebody’s already too late. The boy sways, swallowing tears he refuses to spend, and every syllable hits like a thrown stone—*help, help, help*—until even Harleena’s jaw tightens and Jack’s hands close into fists he has to make himself open again.

Jack’s brow pinched. “Slow down, kid. Who’s attacking you? Who’s got these fire guns?” Cuzão shook his head hard enough to fling soot, panic climbing his voice. “I don’t know! I don’t know! Just men—men with masks and these guns! Ulric’s still there, they’re all there! If you don’t help us now, they’re gonna die!”

Rabbit went to one knee, voice low and steady. “Hey, hey… breathe. We’ll figure it out. One second.” He reached a hand; Cuzão flinched, trembling, eyes blown wide. “We’re not walking yet,” Rabbit added, keeping the calm even, “we need two details and then we go.” Harry, just behind him, couldn’t help the dry edge. “Blowing up a bin to get our attention? Bit overkill, don’t you think?” Cuzão ignored it, chest heaving. “There’s no time for talking! You don’t understand! They’re going to die if you don’t help right now!”

The look the Crows traded was quick and tight. This wasn’t a street scrap. If Ulric Stoneborn’s crew was under the torch, it was bad and getting worse. Jack’s gaze cut to Harleena—her fists still set hard—then back to the boy. “We need something,” he pressed. “Who are these men? How many? How did they come in? We’re not marching blind into a furnace.”

“I don’t know!” Cuzão’s voice cracked into a near-scream. “I don’t know how many! They’ve got fire guns, that’s all! If you won’t come, I’ll find someone who will!” The words shook, but there was iron under them now. He scrubbed blood from his eye with the heel of his hand and forced himself upright. “I won’t leave them to die.” He turned as if to bolt, spun back, face twisted with fear and fury. “Please… if you don’t come with me now, I’ll find someone who will. Even if it kills me.” The sentence hung like a knife. Smoke from the blasted bin curled into the night, neighbors muttering on doorsteps, one of the hired enforcers stepping out to push the crowd back with a flat stare and a lifted weapon.

Jack set his jaw. The indecision broke. “Harry—masks, wet cloths, the red satchel and two lanterns,” he said, already moving. “Rabbit—Veil, smokes, bandages, salt, and whatever you’ve got that turns a corner into cover. Harleena—gear up, light armor. Take the long coat. You’re point with me.” He shifted to Cuzão, voice dropping. “You lead, but you don’t run alone. Fastest way in and where not to step.” The boy blinked hard, grabbed for the words. “Back lane past the tannery, left at the broken pump, through the gap in the fence with the blue rag. There’s a side door by the chapel wall, hinges bad, you can shoulder it. Don’t go down the main hall—the floor’s burning.”

“Symbols?” Rabbit asked, already unwinding a strip of linen from his satchel. “On their coats, their gear—anything?” Cuzão swallowed. “Black coats, heavy. Masks. Copper pipes. One had a little brass sun on his strap.” Rabbit’s eyes flicked to Jack. That was enough of a shape. “Open

up the clinic!” Jack shouted toward the house. Lazarus was already in the doorway; Mitch’s odd smile had vanished. “Boil everything,” Jack snapped. “Six cots cleared. Burn rags ready. Expect smoke lung and burns.”

“On it,” Lazarus said, moving.

Harleena stepped past the bin, knocked it flat with a kick, and stamped a tongue of flame into gutter muck. Her voice was all steel. “If one of those masked men followed the boy, they’ll find us empty.” She looked at Cuzão, held his stare, and handed him a damp kerchief from her pocket. “For your mouth. Slow breaths.”

Harry reappeared with a roll of masks, a coil of soaked cloths, the red satchel thumping his hip. He shoved a mask into Cuzão’s hands and slung another to Rabbit. Rabbit looped a bandage around the boy’s blistered cheek in three fast strokes, then tied off the cloth over his nose. “Breathe through that. Stay between me and Jack. If you fall, shout. We carry you.” Jack checked the lane once, scanned the roofs, then pointed west. “We move. No shouting. No heroics. Kid, keep talking—turns, doors, where the littles hide.” Cuzão nodded so fast he wobbled. The four of them fell into motion—Harleena sliding into the lead, Jack half a step off her shoulder, Rabbit’s hand firm at the boy’s back, Harry bringing up the rear and killing every lamp they passed. The neighbors’ questions faded behind them. The street narrowed, the city’s breath got hotter, and somewhere ahead, under the fog and coal stink, the air had begun to smell like cooked wood and fear.

Ashvale’s streets bent narrow around them, the fog turning the alleys into damp throats that swallowed sound. The orphanage crouched at the far end, its broken spire crooked against the night sky. From the outside it looked wrong—too quiet, too calm. No flame bled through the cracked windows, no smoke curled from the roof. The silence felt staged, like someone had covered chaos with a sheet and dared them to lift it. But above, the lie showed itself: a balloon, low and heavy in the mist, its skin pitch-black and stitched with silver threads that formed the emblem of the Gloam Sisters. It drifted lazily, ropes hanging like nooses, the sigil burning into their eyes.

Harleena’s jaw clenched, every muscle drawn taut. “That doesn’t make sense. Why would they be here?” Her fists twitched at her sides, like she was ready to punch the sky itself if it came lower. Jack’s eyes narrowed, lips curving in that half-smirk that only came when he smelled someone else’s con. “It’s a trick,” he said. “The Ember Circle are flying Gloam colors to throw off the blame. Make it look like their fire, not Circle fire. If they’ve turned on each other…” His voice sharpened, almost hungry. “Then we can use it. I hope they have.”

Rabbit didn’t even glance up. His gaze was locked on the orphanage doors, knuckles white on the strap of his satchel. His voice broke rough as he spat it out: “We don’t have time for this. We’re wasting time. The kids…” He tipped his head down, muttering a prayer through clenched teeth, words fraying with panic. “Lady Luck, watch over me. Keep those kids alive.” And then he was moving—fast, reckless, legs pounding toward the front steps. “Rabbit, wait!” Jack barked, sprinting after him because he always did, because loyalty left no room for pause.

Harleena hissed through her teeth, torn between instinct and fear, her body already lurching forward even as her mind screamed trap. “Godsdamn fools,” she growled, but she was already running too, the weight of choice gone the moment Rabbit’s shadow broke into the firelit yard. Harry lingered a breath longer, eyes flicking between the balloon above and the building ahead. He felt it deep in his bones—that this was wrong, too clean, too staged. But with Rabbit charging headlong into the unknown and the others already on his heels, he had no choice but to curse under his breath and follow, muttering fragments of half-finished spells like a man sharpening blades while running into a war.

Cuzão froze at the edge of the street, his chest heaving like he'd swallowed half the smoke himself. His eyes darted from the orphanage to the balloon to the faces of the Crows, wild and glassy, like a cornered animal looking for one last way out. "I… I need to find more help," he rasped, each word scraped raw from his throat. His small hands clenched into fists, trembling from more than exhaustion. "I can't just sit here, not while they're in there! I'll be back. I swear it. Don't let them die." The words cracked in the middle, and for a moment he looked more like a child than a fighter. He turned to Harleena and Harry, desperation written so hard across his face it almost hurt to look at him. "Don't let them die."

Harleena's gaze swept the rooftops, her jaw set tight enough to ache. The fog clung heavy, every shadow threatening to resolve into the outline of an ambush. She gave Cuzão one sharp nod, but her eyes softened, just for a heartbeat. "Go. Run fast. And don't stop until you find someone." Her voice was steady steel, but behind it sat fear—not for herself, but for whether they could deliver on the promise the boy had just forced into their hands.

Jack and Rabbit surged forward, boots hammering against the soot-slick cobblestones. The orphanage loomed ahead like a corpse propped upright, its walls blackened in places where smoke had licked out between the boards. The balloon above shifted in the wind, ropes creaking like groans in the dark. Then the first hiss cut through the night—oil spilling, flames tumbling down from the sky like a curtain of knives.

"Down!" Jack barked, his voice sharp as gunshot. He shoved Rabbit sideways, the two of them slamming into the wet cobbles as fire burst across the yard. The heat struck them like a living thing, sucking the air out of their lungs, the smell of burning oil clawing up their throats. Flames leapt in hungry arcs, turning puddles into sudden traps and casting everything in wild, flickering light. The quiet street was gone; now it was a battlefield.

"They're trying to burn us alive!" Jack shouted, rolling away from another sheet of fire that hissed as it hit the ground. Rabbit coughed hard, his chest rattling, smoke clawing into his lungs. His eyes locked on the orphanage, on those blackened doors that seemed to sag under the weight of screams they couldn't hear. His face was streaked with grime and sweat, but his voice was iron. "We're not stopping. Those kids are in there, Jack. I'm not letting them die."

Jack's gaze snapped to him through the haze of flame, firelight etching every line of his face in harsh relief. His eyes flickered, sharp and calculating even now, but something else glimmered beneath the steel—something human. He gave one short nod, grim and final. "Then we go get them."

They pressed forward, the world around them collapsing into smoke and flame. The hiss of oil rained down again, droplets spattering fire across the yard, the smell so thick it coated their tongues. Smoke wrapped around their heads, burning eyes and throats, making each breath a fight. Their boots slid on wet stone, sparks leaping underfoot, every step a test of balance between survival and determination. The orphanage doors loomed closer—blackened wood, cracked and swollen with heat, trembling in their frames as if they might burst outward at any second.

Behind them, Harleena and Harry moved in careful rhythm, every nerve strung tight. Harleena's fists clenched and unclenched, sweat slicking her palms. Her eyes darted constantly—from alleys to roofs to the balloon swaying above—looking for the ambush she knew was coming. "There's more," she muttered, teeth clenched, the words vibrating with fury. "There's got to be more hiding, waiting for us to walk into it."

Harry's voice came low and tight, his usual sarcasm stripped to the bone. "We'll handle it. We always do." But even he could hear the tremor beneath his words, could feel the sweat slicking the back of his neck. His mind raced through half-learned spells and half-trusted charms, none

of them enough against fire that poured from the sky like rain. Still, he forced his hand near his satchel, ready to carve signs in the air if desperation demanded it.

Above them, the balloon drifted lower, the black canvas swallowing light, the emblem of the Gloam Sisters gleaming in silver thread that caught firelight like a sneer. Whether it was truth or trick, it pressed a weight onto the moment, a reminder that this fight wasn't just about kids or flames—it was about the city itself, tearing at its own skin.

And still the Crows kept moving, each breath harder than the last, each heartbeat a drum counting them closer to the broken door. Smoke wrapped their bodies, sweat ran into their eyes, and the heat stung like lashes, but none of them stopped. They had no choice. Somewhere beyond that door were screams they hadn't heard yet, and none of them would forgive themselves if the silence that followed was permanent.

Harleena and Harry crouched at the edge of the lane, the heat of the fire curling against their faces as the balloon above poured its rain of flame toward Jack and Rabbit. Harry's throat tightened; his fingers twitched like they wanted to draw runes in the air but found nothing strong enough to matter. "We've got to do something," he hissed, panic threatening to crack his voice.

Harleena's jaw was set like stone, her eyes locked on the sky. She dropped to one knee, sliding her rifle from its sling with the ease of muscle memory. The chaos of firelight flickered across her face, but her hands were steady as she braced the weapon against her shoulder. "I've got it," she muttered, voice low, more to herself than to Harry. Through the scope, the world narrowed to a single image—the brass burner mechanism, glowing faint orange from the heat of its own fire. She slowed her breathing, each inhale and exhale an anchor in the storm. Then she squeezed the trigger.

The crack of the shot tore through the din, sharp and final. For a heartbeat, nothing—then the bullet found its mark. The burner shuddered, split, and belched flame in a wild arc. The men in the basket screamed, their outlines writhing silhouettes as fire swallowed them. The balloon lurched, canvas catching in the sudden burst, and then it was falling—slow at first, then faster, faster—plummeting like a wounded beast. It slammed into the rooftops beyond the orphanage, vanishing in a roar of fire and breaking timber. The echo of the crash rolled across the street, and smoke boiled into the sky.

Harleena lowered her rifle, the faint recoil still humming in her shoulder. She didn't smile, not exactly, but there was a flash of grim satisfaction in her eyes. She turned to Harry, who was staring at the black plume rising behind the orphanage. "That should buy us some time," she said, voice clipped but certain. "Let's move. They'll be scrambling." Harry swallowed hard, nodded, and the two pushed forward through the haze.

Inside, the orphanage was a tomb of heat and shadow. They found Jack and Rabbit in what had once been a reception room, the plaster walls scorched black, the air choked with the stench of oil and wet smoke. An unconscious man lay slumped against the desk, wrists bound with Rabbit's belt. Rabbit straightened, flashing them a grin that carried more nerves than humor. "In my rush, I might've knocked him out... by accident," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jack wasn't listening. He crouched low, tugging at the man's vest. The fabric gleamed oddly in the firelight, thicker, treated. Jack's eyes narrowed. "Fire-retardant material," he muttered. Without hesitation, he stripped off his own jacket, tossed it aside, and pulled the vest over his shirt. "We'll need all the protection we can get."

Rabbit's gaze swept the walls, his brow furrowing. The scorch marks told one story—flame jets raked along plaster and wood, black streaks carved into the old structure—but scattered among them was something else. White residue foamed across corners, dripped down doorframes,

puddled in streaks on the floorboards. He crouched, dragged two fingers through it, sniffed. Fire-retardant foam. His gut twisted. They were using fire, yes, but not to erase everything. Not to kill indiscriminately. These men weren't trying to reduce the place to ash—they were carving, cutting, searching. Looking for something.

He stood, his jaw tight, scanning the room again as if the walls themselves might tell him what was missing. Through the broken windows of the reception hall, the grounds came into view. Shadows moved outside, slow and deliberate. Figures in heavy black coats, masks glinting, shoulders hunched with purpose. They weren't running. They weren't panicked. They were combing. The sound of their boots echoed faintly from deeper inside—the steady rhythm of a sweep. Voices followed, low, muffled, carrying no urgency, only control. The kind of sound men made when they already believed they had the upper hand. Jack's face hardened, the smirk gone. He glanced once at Harleena, then Rabbit, then Harry. "They're everywhere," he said, voice flat, the weight of it enough to drag the air heavier around them. His hand tightened around the hilt of his blade. "We've got to be careful. One wrong move, and we're not rescuing kids—we're walking into their trap."

Harry's nerves were a live wire under his skin, every flicker of flame making him twitch. He cast a sharp glance at the door they'd forced open, then up to the black streaks coiling along the ceiling. "How much time do we even have before the authorities show up?" His words came fast, clipped, as if the answer might already be too late. Harleena's reply was colder, steadier. She tilted her chin toward the distant street, listening for the thrum of boots or the toll of the Espiritas bell. "Not much. The Imperial police don't ignore blasts like this, and if the Espiritas catch the scent—" her mouth tightened, "—they'll descend like wolves. If they're on their way already, we've got minutes, maybe less."

Jack's eyes narrowed, the gears of his mind turning even as the heat pressed close. "If this were my job," he said darkly, voice pitched low so it carried only to them, "I'd never count on minutes. I'd hit Ashvale with more than one fire. Half the district goes up, every copper runs in circles, and this place buys itself an hour, maybe two." He spoke like a man giving a lecture, each word weighed. The others froze at that, staring. Even the flames seemed to hush a moment in the silence. Harleena broke it first. Her voice was sharp as a cutlass. "You've thought about this too much for my liking." Jack met her glare without blinking, the corner of his mouth twitching in something that wasn't quite a smile. "Takes a criminal to read a criminal. And I was one long before I became anything else."

The words hung heavy. No one pushed back. Instead, the crew shifted, weapons higher, eyes sharper, each of them bracing against the unknown waiting deeper inside the orphanage. Rabbit exhaled through his nose, shaking tension off with that gambler's charm that always seemed one beat away from cracking. A grin crept across his soot-streaked face, reckless and defiant. "Luck's on our side, Jack. It has to be. Let's test it." He slid past them to the meeting room door, one hand light on his pistol grip, and pushed it open with his shoulder. "Anyone in here?" he called, the words easy but edged. A long, tense beat. Then movement. A soldier's head appeared around the corner, mask pushed up, confusion shadowing his eyes. That hesitation was fatal. Rabbit moved like a spring cut loose, slamming the man against the wall so hard the plaster cracked. The soldier grunted, wind knocked out of him, as Rabbit's forearm drove into his chest. "Gotcha," Rabbit muttered, low and grim, face inches from the man's. His gaze dropped to the thick vest strapped across the soldier's torso, firelight glinting off reinforced fabric. His grin died in a thin line. "Ember Circle," he spat, venom in the words. "Emberlash and Emberwing's tricks written all over it."

Before the weight of that landed, the rhythm of boots thundered from the hallway. Another soldier burst through smoke and flame, weapon raised. Jack didn't wait. He swung the mace he brought in a brutal arc, iron head smashing into the man's chest with a crack that reverberated

through the boards. The soldier flew backward, crumpling onto the floor in a heap. Jack advanced a step, mace raised again, but froze. His brow furrowed. “That’s… odd,” he muttered, eyes narrowing. “No scream. Not even a gasp.” Because the man hadn’t just fallen. He’d landed on top of something—or someone. A smaller figure was pinned beneath him, half-hidden in smoke and shadow. Thin arms strained against the soldier’s bulk. Wide, terrified eyes stared up at them from the floorboards, catching the firelight. A teenager.

They heaved the soldier’s weight aside, boots scraping on scorched boards, and the figure underneath pulled free with a sharp jerk. Recognition struck all at once, like a spark catching dry tinder. Ulric Stoneborn. Fifteen years old, wrapped in a too-large coat that hung like armor, his face streaked with soot and blood but his sharp eyes alive, burning. There was no panic in them—only a ferocity that didn’t belong to a boy his age. He didn’t waste breath on words. Ulric’s hand snapped up in a quick, clipped gesture: follow. His jaw was set hard, mouth clamped against anything that might give them away. When Jack opened his mouth, Ulric cut him off with another motion—sharp, precise, commanding silence. No talking. Just move. Jack traded a look with Rabbit, who only gave a helpless shrug, lips quirking in a grim half-smile. “Looks like we’re following the kid’s lead,” he whispered under his breath, though the tension in his voice betrayed him.

Ulric was already moving, body low, steps sure. He signed directions with his hands—two fingers slicing right, a flat palm for stop, a sharp point ahead to go. He knew the orphanage like his own skin, weaving them through narrow corridors where firelight licked along the walls, steering them past doorways that glowed too hot, past shadows that moved with hostile weight. The Crows followed, silent but taut with energy. Harleena moved like a blade unsheathed, rifle up, every turn of her head calculated, her eyes sharp enough to cut. Harry whispered fragments of old words under his breath, not spells he trusted but reflexes of fear, muttering prayers to a power that seemed deaf. Rabbit padded behind Ulric with that gambler’s grin welded to his face, though sweat traced his temple—his grin had never been armor so thin. Jack’s heart hammered against his ribs. The questions chewed at him—how many enemies, why here, why now, who wanted the Stoneborn burned alive?—but Ulric’s silence was unyielding. The boy wasn’t just surviving; he was leading, as if every step had already been plotted in his head. “Looks like the kid knows what he’s doing,” Rabbit murmured, voice pitched low, still pretending at ease. Harleena’s eyes narrowed, never leaving Ulric’s back. Her reply was a warning drawn in iron. “He better. If we run into more of those fire-soldiers, luck won’t save us twice.”

Ulric shoved the timber into place with a grunt, the wood groaning as it wedged tight against the window frame. The firelight from outside vanished, leaving only the faint glow of embers bleeding through cracks in the walls. The room smelled of smoke and damp plaster, old mildew rising as if the heat had woken it from the wood itself. Shadows stretched long and jagged across the ceiling, making every figure look half-ghost. Ulric turned back to them, shoulders squared, eyes darting quick from face to face. He was breathing hard, chest rising and falling, but his gaze was sharp—sharp enough to make it clear he wasn’t some kid caught in the wrong fight.

“Who the hell are you?” His whisper cut the dark, low and urgent, the kind of tone that made it clear a wrong answer would see them thrown back into the hall without hesitation. Jack stepped forward slowly, palms raised, showing nothing but open skin and calm. His voice was steady, patient, a man used to disarming more with words than weapons. “We’re here because of Cuzão. He found us. Said you and your people were under attack.” Harry lingered in the shadows behind Jack, arms folded across his chest, that sly half-smile carving into his face. “We’re the Crows,” he added lightly, though his voice carried an edge that made the name sit heavier in the dark. “Word’s out we’re good at dealing with… problems.”

Ulric's eyes flicked between them, weighing the claim like a scale set on a knife edge. Sweat shone at his hairline, cutting tracks through the soot on his face. His voice came tight, strained but firm. "I've never met you. I don't know you. But I don't have much of a choice right now, do I?" His knuckles brushed his brow, wiping away sweat and ash in the same motion. For a moment he looked older than fifteen, a boy aged into a commander by fire and loss. His eyes softened, just slightly, when he said: "Cuzão did well, getting away. I wasn't sure he'd make it. None of us were sure." Jack held his gaze. "We're here now," he said simply. The words weren't a boast, just a fact. "Tell us what you need."

The silence stretched a moment too long before Ulric finally let out a shaky exhale, his guard dipping by inches. He glanced toward the door, toward the muffled sound of boots thudding down hallways, then back to them. "Alright," he said at last, voice flat with exhaustion but sharpened by urgency. "We're under attack from the Ember Circle. I don't know why—they didn't exactly send a note explaining." His lips twisted in a grim attempt at humor that died as quickly as it formed. "They've got most of my kids locked up in a makeshift cell on the other side of the building—the old toilets. I managed to slip away, but they want me. I know it. They're searching the place room by room, like wolves sniffing out blood."

He knelt on the floor, dragging a finger through the grime to sketch a crude layout—the chapel wing, the barracks where the smaller kids had been hiding, the washroom with its cracked tile and broken pipes. His hand trembled, but his voice didn't. "I counted seven of their elites. Suits thicker, weapons hotter—they're the ones giving orders. And another nine regulars spread through the halls. They move in pairs, except the elites. They don't need anyone watching their backs." Harleena crouched to see the scrawl, her rifle steady in her hands even in the tight space. Her eyes narrowed at the numbers. "That's a lot of firepower for an orphanage."

"They're not here to torch us and go," Ulric said flatly. "If that's all they wanted, the place would already be ash. No—they're hunting. Looking for something… or someone. Most likely me." The weight of the words settled into the room like ash drifting down after a blaze, heavy and impossible to ignore. Rabbit Foot let out a low whistle, shaking his head as if he were trying to clear the ringing of the fire still echoing in his ears. "That's a hell of a lot of firepower," he murmured, his tone caught somewhere between disbelief and grudging admiration. His eyes flicked back to Ulric, measuring the boy not like a child anymore but like a fellow player at the table. "How many have you taken down already?" Ulric's expression hardened, his jaw set in a way that made him look older than his years. "One," he said bluntly. "I killed him just before your guy hit him with a hammer." His eyes cut toward Jack, flashing both irritation and reluctant gratitude in the same glance. "Thanks for that, by the way."

Jack rolled a shoulder, expression calm but unapologetic. "Didn't know he was already dead," he said, voice even as stone. He leaned against the nearest wall, letting the weight of his mace rest on his shoulder. "I don't like taking chances." Harleena, her back to the door, arms crossed over her chest like a barricade, narrowed her eyes as if she were lining up a shot she hadn't taken yet. Her voice was low, sharp, and precise. "And what about Emberwing? He's in this mess, right?" At the name, Ulric's face darkened, shadows carving deeper into the lines of his soot-stained features. He nodded once, the movement taut with fury he barely kept leashed. "Yeah. Emberwing's in the building. He's got Dadinho and Boquinha in a locked room—secure, reinforced. I've heard them screaming. He's torturing them, trying to squeeze out where I am." His hands curled into fists so tight his knuckles went white under the grime. "He's hunting me, but I won't leave my people behind."

Harleena's jaw tightened, her teeth pressing so hard the muscle in her cheek jumped. "Emberwing's in this building," she repeated, every syllable like a bullet being chambered. "Great. He's the kind of problem that doesn't go away easily." Her voice carried a simmering promise—she'd put him down, but she knew it wouldn't be clean. Jack's brow furrowed, his

voice quieter now but edged with urgency, every word deliberate. “Why would the Ember Circle come after you like this? A full raid, heavy suits, fire guns? What do they want with a gang of kids?” Ulric shook his head sharply, his damp hair sticking to his temples. “I don’t know. I don’t have the luxury of figuring that out right now.” He straightened, the flickering light from the cracks in the boards cutting his features into hard lines. “What I do know is this—my crew’s locked up, and Emberwing’s not going to stop until he finds me. If he does, if I’m caught, then we’re all as good as dead.”

The words landed in the silence like embers on dry cloth, catching fast. Even Rabbit’s grin faltered for once, replaced by a flicker of something rarer—unease. Harry rubbed the back of his neck, the unease plain in his voice. “So what’s the plan then? You can’t just fight your way through a bunch of elites and expect to get everyone out.” A flicker of a smile cut across Ulric’s soot-streaked face, sharp but grim. “You’re right. We won’t be fighting our way out. We’ll be moving in the shadows. They’ve got the place lit up like a fortress. If we cut the lights, they lose their advantage. In the dark, they’re just men with fire toys and no sight lines. That’s when we move.” Rabbit Foot’s eyes gleamed, the edge of excitement slipping through. “Shadows, huh? That’s my kind of table. With a little luck, this’ll be over before they know they’re losing.” Jack crossed his arms, his stare steady on Ulric. “End game, then. Get the kids out? Or take out Emberwing?”

Ulric’s jaw tightened, his voice low, every word clipped with fury. “Rescue my crew first. Then Emberwing. He’s not leaving this place alive.” Harry lifted a cautious hand, ever the one to force details into the open. “Hold on. Let’s be clear. We cut the lights, rescue the kids, and… what? Fight through a building crawling with elites? There’s got to be more to it than that.” Ulric gave a curt nod. “Once the lights go out, they’ll be blind and confused. We move fast, hit hard, don’t give them time to regroup. Emberwing thinks he’s in control, but once he’s groping in the dark, we change the rules.” Harleena shifted against the wall, arms still crossed, her eyes narrowing like gunmetal. “And you trust us with this? You don’t even know us.” Ulric met her stare without flinching. “I don’t have a choice. You’re here. I need help. If you’re in, we do this together.”

Jack glanced at his crew, reading them one by one: Harleena, cautious but coiled to fight; Rabbit, eager to roll the dice no matter the odds; Harry, weighing risk like scales but leaning toward the leap. He gave a slow nod. “Alright. We’re in. We get your kids out. And then we make sure Emberwing regrets ever stepping into Ashvale.” Ulric returned the nod, short and sharp. “Good. Follow my lead. Stay quiet. Move fast. We’re getting my people out, and we’re cutting down anyone who tries to stop it.”

He turned to the door but froze with his hand on the handle, his gaze flicking back to them, expression grim. His voice dropped to a whisper, every syllable weighted. “Before we go further, there’s something you need to hear. I can feel it—two Umbral Items. You’re carrying them.” His eyes passed over each Crow, as if daring them to deny it. “And listen: there are others here. More than I can count. The Ember Circle—” his voice sharpened, near a hiss, “—they’re obsessed with the Ring. You know that. If they find out there’s even one Item in this building, let alone more, they’ll burn the whole neighbourhood to ash to get it. We’re all dead if they know.” Silence collapsed on the room. Harry’s brow knotted, his hand slipping inside his coat to tighten around the Umbral Rod hidden there, his pulse spiking. “You’re sure?” he asked, voice strained with a weight he hadn’t wanted to name. “How can they sense them? What do we do?” Ulric’s eyes were steel. “Keep them secret. Don’t let them know. Word’s already on the street: the Umbral Ring was stolen from the Deadland Woods. No one knows by who. If the Circle figures out it’s here—or worse, that there are *more* Items here—it’s over. They’ll burn us alive.” Rabbit and Harry exchanged a sharp look, the kind that carried more fear than either wanted to say aloud.

Rabbit's easy grin faltered, his mask of calm slipping for the first time that night. The words sat heavy in the room, pressing on him like smoke. "A *third* Umbral Item, huh?" he muttered, almost to himself. His eyes flicked to Harry, then to the door Ulric had just left through, unease twisting in his chest. "Damn… guess that explains why the air's been feeling off lately." Harry's jaw clenched tight, the weight of it sinking on him too. "So… they know something was stolen," he said slowly, his voice low, "but they don't know it was us."

"*Yet,*" Rabbit added, the word sharp as broken glass. His tone dropped to a whisper, as though the walls themselves might be listening. His thoughts churned fast—he'd been so careful, so precise, keeping the Ring's secret buried. But Doskvol had its ways. Secrets spread here like coal dust in a furnace: invisible until it burned your lungs. He touched his chest, feeling the cold circle hidden under layers of cloth, and for the first time it felt heavier than the mace Jack swung, heavier than all the coin they'd made. Not just power. Not just luck. A target. A curse. If he slipped—just once—the Circle would know. And then the city wouldn't rest until he was ashes in a gutter. He forced a breath through his teeth, steadying himself.

Harleena broke the silence like a blade through rope. Her voice was sharp, deliberate, and left no room for argument. "Then we don't slip. We keep it hidden. No one needs to know what we're carrying." Her eyes cut first to Rabbit, then Harry, as if daring either to falter. "We're not losing anyone today. Not to the Circle, not to Emberwing, not to anyone." Ulric nodded once, quick and sharp. "Good. Be careful." His stare lingered a beat longer, unreadable, before he eased the door open and slipped back into the hall, vanishing like smoke into the dark. The silence he left behind was loud. Rabbit exhaled slow, dragging a hand down his face, his fingers brushing the Ring through his shirt. "The city already knows someone took it," he murmured, voice low, half-confession, half-promise. "But nobody knows it's me. And I plan to keep it that way."

Harry's eyes narrowed, meeting him with quiet understanding. "We can't afford to let this slip," he said, the weight in his voice matching the resolve in his gaze. "Not with everything else stacking against us. And we need to find who's holding that third Item, too. We can't let it blindside us." Rabbit gave a rare, humorless nod, his usual playfulness replaced by a grim steadiness. "Yeah. You're right. We'll figure it out. But first…" He glanced toward the hall, where muffled footsteps still echoed. His voice hardened. "We get those kids out. That's the only move right now." The tension sat heavy in the air, pressing on all of them. Jack cut it short with a grim finality in his tone. "We can't sit here any longer." His eyes flicked from face to face, then down to the unconscious Circle soldier at their feet. With quick, deliberate motions, he stripped the man's fire-retardant coat and mask, pulling them onto himself, adjusting the buckles snugly. "I'll bait one in," he said, voice flat but resolute. "We set the trap and cut our way forward."

Chapter 4: **Flames of Desperation - Part 2**

Jack adjusted the heavy coat, tugging the buckles until they pinched his chest, the mask's copper pipes rattling faintly as he breathed. It stank of oil and smoke, and he could almost feel the heat of its last owner still clinging to the fabric, as if the dead man's sweat hadn't finished leaving yet. He pulled the mask low, hiding his features in the blank metal face, and when he looked at Harry, the boy's pale reflection glinted back at him in the copper sheen. Harry's hands were trembling, his knuckles pale where he clutched the edge of his spellbook. His voice came strained, thin but determined. "Alright… I'll summon something. Something that'll scare the daylights out of them." Jack gave him the smallest nod, a silent pact of trust, and stepped toward the hall. Behind him, Harry sucked in a ragged breath, closing his eyes so hard his lashes trembled. The words he whispered were jagged things, too old for his tongue, scraping out of his mouth like broken glass. His chest rose and fell with each syllable, his jaw clenching against the weight of them, and then the air in the room changed. It grew heavy, thick as damp stone, until even Harleena shifted uneasily, fingers twitching along the barrel of her rifle. Rabbit's gambler's grin slipped a fraction as he glanced at Harry, muttering under his breath, "Lady Luck, keep your leash on him…" But Harry was gone into it now, his eyes opening in a slow burn of fiery red that lit the smoke-darkened room. Power rushed through him, not clean, not controlled, but violent—dark water breaking a dam—and for a heartbeat his breath hitched like he thought it might drown him.

From the shadowed corner, the thing came. It pulled itself into shape as if the darkness itself were clay being stretched into form: a humanoid bulk, too tall for the ceiling so that its head bowed low, and from its shoulders writhed ten arms, each tipped in claws slick with something not-quite-blood. Its faces—five of them, stacked and twisted—shifted as if trying to agree on what expression to wear, some snarling, some weeping, some blank. It breathed with a wet hiss, every inhale rattling, and the smell that followed was rot mixed with iron. It hunched, waiting, eyes like coals lit in mud, and Harry whispered through clenched teeth, "Please… hold… just hold a little longer." His whole body shook, sweat streaking his face, the strain of holding the leash on this nightmare pressing his lips into a tight grimace. Rabbit stared at it wide-eyed for one long beat before turning away, muttering, "If that's luck, I'd rather not see what losing looks like." Harleena's face was stone, her rifle steady but her knuckles pale, voice sharp enough to cut the tension. "Keep it under your boot, Harry. If that thing turns on us, I'll drop it before I drop them." Harry only nodded once, jaw set, every muscle in his neck straining like rope about to snap.

Jack moved then, slipping into the corridor with the heavy boots thudding dull against the charred boards. The heat from deeper in the building licked his neck even through the suit, sweat gathering under the mask, but he forced his voice to stay low, urgent, panicked. He spotted a soldier rounding the corner, the man's mask gleaming in the flicker of torchlight, his nozzle weapon slung lazy like he didn't expect trouble here. Perfect. Jack staggered, one hand pressed against the wall like he'd barely survived what he was running from, and pitched his voice high and cracking with terror. "Hey! You there!" he barked, making it half a plea, half a cry. "Help me! There's—there's a monster, a freak, an abomination!" He let the word hang like it

burned his throat. He threw a glance over his shoulder, as if afraid to look too long at the nightmare Harry had called, and raised both hands in frantic urgency. “You have to see this! It’s tearing the place apart!” The soldier paused, suspicion narrowing his eyes behind the mask’s lenses, but Jack’s disguise was good—the coat, the pipes, the soot staining every edge—and his desperation felt too real to fake. Slowly, the soldier’s weapon lowered a fraction, curiosity tugging at him, and he began to step forward. Jack’s pulse kicked harder. The trap was baited. Now all they had to do was spring it.

The soldier Jack had lured in froze mid-step, his gaze snagging on the writhing horror that Harry had conjured into the corner. Ten arms writhed like snakes in a pit, five faces pulling against each other in grief, rage, hunger, and something worse—something wordless that whispered inside the bones. The soldier’s breath caught with a wet hitch inside his mask, then tore out of him in a scream that cracked under its own weight. “Oh gods! What is that?!” His whole body recoiled, knees nearly buckling as he shoved past Jack, the panic turning his limbs into flailing pistons. His boots hammered the floor, his weapon forgotten at his side as he bolted for the door, driven by nothing but the animal need to survive. The sound of his fear filled the hall—raw, jagged, honest.

He never saw Rabbit waiting.

Rabbit crouched in the shadows of the entryway like a patient spider, his eyes tracking every movement, every frantic stomp of the soldier’s boots. His pulse stayed steady, his grin thin and sharp, the kind of smile a man makes when the game finally tips his way. The soldier’s panic spilled across the room, thick as smoke, and Rabbit breathed it in like incense, letting it guide his hand. He whispered into the dark, soft enough for only the shadows to hear, “Lady Luck, keep smiling on me.” And then came the second voice—the scrape of another mask, the hiss of copper pipes, the thud of boots closing in. Another Ember Circle member, drawn by the scream, stepping right into the jaws of the trap.

The door groaned open, spilling torchlight across the warped boards, and there he was—broad-shouldered under the blackened coat, mask lenses glowing faint in the reflection of fire. He had no time to register the scene. Rabbit moved. His knife flashed in the dim, cold steel sliding along the edge of the man’s throat before the soldier even realized he wasn’t alone. Rabbit’s arm locked tight, dragging him backward into the dark, the blade biting close enough that the soldier froze, breath seizing. For a moment his eyes widened—just enough to betray the truth beneath his sneer. Behind the mask’s glass, Rabbit caught the reflection of fear: pupils blown wide, darting, betraying the flicker of a man who suddenly knew he’d stepped into the wrong room.

The soldier tried to cover it, twisting his face into a sneer, words spitting past the copper pipes like acid. “You think this will save you?” His voice shook just enough to undercut the bravado, the faint quiver that made the sneer into a mask of its own. Rabbit felt the tremor, the sharp intake of breath, the way the man’s chest pressed against the knife with each heartbeat. He could feel the chill of it himself, a cold that ran up the steel and into his hand, setting gooseflesh on his arms even as the warmth of another man’s terror radiated into him. He leaned in, close enough that his breath ghosted against the soldier’s ear, close enough for his grin to carry weight. The Circle’s words kept spilling, trying to cover the quake in his chest. “We’re the Ember Circle. You’re all dead by dawn. Emberlash himself gave the order.”

The name landed like a spark in dry straw, but Rabbit only let the blade press a fraction deeper, his voice low, amused, carrying the steady certainty of a man who always knew how to call a bluff. Rabbit tightened his grip until the man's breath came shallow, the knife trembling against the thin skin of his throat. He leaned in close, his words sliding into the soldier's ear like cold smoke. "Is that right? You think Emberlash scares me?" His tone was calm, unhurried, the kind of confidence that comes from a man who'd played this game too many times and always walked away with the winnings. "You're gonna answer some questions, or I'll show you a real reason to be scared." He spoke evenly, as if reciting lines from a play he already knew the ending to, and the quiet menace in his voice carried more weight than any shouted threat ever could.

The soldier tried to hide it, tried to scowl through the fear, but the flicker in his eyes betrayed him. Rabbit pressed the blade just enough to draw a pinprick of red, sharp and stinging, and the man winced. "What are you doing here tonight?" Rabbit asked, his voice suddenly snapping sharp, every syllable like a card slapped onto a table.

The soldier swallowed, his throat scraping against the blade. Still, he managed to twist his mouth into another sneer. "Isn't it obvious? We're here for Ulric Stoneborn and whatever he's hiding." His eyes narrowed, his voice swelling with false bravado, the defiance of a man too proud—or too scared—to shut up. "But you'll be dead long before you ever understand why."

Rabbit's smile curled slow, deliberate, the grin of a gambler who'd just seen the last card and knew the hand was his. He didn't need to press further; Ulric's warning was echoing in his skull, louder now, sharper. Umbral Items. That's what they wanted. That's what this was all about. The Ember Circle wasn't here for some ragged crew of kids—they were here for the kind of power you couldn't hold in your hands without it burning you. Rabbit's grip shifted, his voice darkening. "Where are the kids?"

The question cut deeper than the blade. For the first time, the soldier hesitated, silence hanging between them like a wire pulled too tight. Then he exhaled through clenched teeth, voice flat. "Cells. Makeshift ones. Deeper in the orphanage. They're leverage—bait for that brat you're so keen on helping."

A low hum of satisfaction rippled through Rabbit's chest. That was the piece he needed. He could feel the plan sketching itself in his mind, risky as hell but with edges sharp enough to draw blood if played right. Slowly—so slow the soldier's breath caught at the sudden absence of pressure—Rabbit withdrew the knife from his throat. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he tossed it aside. The blade clanged against the warped floorboards, the metallic echo bouncing down the narrow corridor like a mocking laugh.

The soldier blinked, confusion breaking across his face. His brows drew tight, his mouth tugging into something between a frown and a gape. "What… what are you doing?" he stammered, disbelief cracking his voice.

Rabbit raised his hands in mock surrender, the picture of smug ease. His grin didn't fade—it widened. "Take me to your boss. To the cells." His tone was light, sarcastic, as if he were offering himself up for a joke no one else got. But underneath, woven into every syllable, was a

current of confidence, a silent dare: try to read me, try to guess if I'm bluffing. "You wanted me, didn't you?"

The soldier's confusion hardened into a kind of incredulity, then split into laughter. Short, breathless, the kind of laugh that wasn't joy but disbelief. He tilted his head back slightly, letting out a harsh, mocking chuckle muffled through the pipes of his mask. "You're insane," he hissed, shaking his head. "Walking to your own death, and you've got the gall to smirk about it." His eyes narrowed again, but this time there was no disdain—just wary calculation. "Fine. Let's see how long that smile lasts when Emberwing gets his hands on you."

"You think this is some kind of joke?" The soldier's voice came low, guttural, his contempt sharpened to a blade. He shoved Rabbit hard against the wall, the wood groaning with the impact, then yanked his arms behind him with a cruel twist. The rope bit deep as it cinched tight, rough fibers scraping skin raw. The soldier leaned in close, his mask hissing faintly with each breath, the reek of smoke and oil seeping from him. "You really think surrendering will save you?" His sneer curled in his words, dripping with contempt. "This is the last mistake you'll ever make."

Rabbit's face didn't flinch. If anything, his grin widened, sly and lopsided, the kind of smile that had unnerved tougher men at card tables. "Last mistake?" he drawled, his voice calm despite the sting at his wrists. "Buddy, I've made worse mistakes before breakfast." The soldier shoved him forward in reply, a rough jerk that nearly sent Rabbit sprawling. His boots scraped against scorched boards as he steadied himself, and he let the stumble play out, looking every bit the beaten prisoner even as his eyes stayed sharp, calculating every step.

The corridor swallowed them in shadow, lit only by the erratic flicker of torches wedged into cracked sconces. Every footstep echoed, the sound bouncing ahead into the dark, making it impossible to tell how far the hall stretched. Rabbit's ears tracked each rhythm—the soldier's heavy boots, his own softer scrape, and somewhere deeper in the building, the faint tread of more men shifting patrols. The air smelled of smoke and damp plaster, the ghost of fire-retardant foam clinging in acrid streaks. His pulse stayed steady, but he felt the stakes pressing like a weight on his chest. This wasn't just a gamble. This was throwing his whole pile of coin on the table, daring fate to show its hand.

Ahead, a figure loomed out of the gloom. The soldier tensed, tugging Rabbit harder, rope biting deeper. Jack. Disguised in the fire-retardant suit, the mask catching the flicker of torchlight, his silhouette was indistinguishable from the other Circle men. His stride was unhurried, his shoulders squared, every inch the part of a loyal soldier answering only to Emberwing. As they drew close, Rabbit caught the smallest flicker—a tilt of the head, subtle, practiced, so quick no one without reason would notice. A nod. A message. I see you. I understand.

Rabbit's lips curled, just enough to show teeth, a smile that could have been mistaken for madness. He straightened, letting the soldier's grip jerk him forward, but his heart thrummed steady as a drumbeat. This was working. Jack was in position. The trap was setting itself, the pieces falling into place like cards in his palm. He dipped his chin, a nod so slight it barely counted as movement, but enough for Jack to see. I trust you. Don't miss the cue.

The soldier dragged him past without pause, spitting a bitter laugh. “Keep smiling, dead man. Emberwing’s going to burn that grin right off your face.” Rabbit kept walking, wrists bound, eyes forward, every line of his body loose and easy. But inside, beneath the mask of calm, he whispered a prayer to the only gods he’d ever believed in: luck and timing. And so far? Both were still with him.

The corridors of the orphanage twisted like a maze, each turn tighter and darker, the air thick with smoke and whispers of fire. Ulric moved quick, crouched low, guiding Harleena through the secret paths only he and his gang knew: vents hidden behind warped panels, crawlspaces carved out of the walls long before this night, doors that opened only if you knew which board to press. His hands moved with certainty, every gesture sharp, every glance betraying the pressure chewing at his young face. Harleena followed, rifle cradled close, her eyes flicking like twin razors through every shadow.

They slipped out of a vent into a narrow hallway, floorboards groaning under their weight. That’s when Harleena’s sharp gaze snapped ahead—and froze. Rabbit. Tied, being dragged by a Circle soldier, his grin faint but still cocky, like he had the whole world playing his game. For a fleeting heartbeat their eyes locked, and Rabbit tilted his chin, a small nod. A signal. A reassurance. Trust me. I’ve got this.

Harleena’s brows furrowed, confusion warring with instinct, but she didn’t break her cover. She gave the faintest nod back, rifle steady. Ulric, however, went rigid. His face twisted, disbelief flashing into fury. His hands clenched at his sides, and by the time they slipped fully out of the vent, he couldn’t contain it.

“Are you kidding me?” His whisper was harsh, venom-laced, each word hurled like a knife. His eyes burned, wide and incredulous. “This is your plan? You just… let one of your own get dragged off like a dog? What the hell are you people doing?” His voice trembled—not with fear, but with the sharp edge of someone who couldn’t afford to trust and was watching that belief confirmed.

Harleena’s head snapped toward him, her eyes narrowing, the heat in her chest rising fast. “Watch your mouth, kid,” she hissed, her voice steady but dangerous. “You don’t get to question our methods. We came here, uninvited, risking our necks for *your* gang, for *your* kids. Rabbit knows exactly what he’s doing.”

Ulric’s nostrils flared, his glare cutting like glass. “Knows what he’s doing?” he shot back, his whisper sharp enough to bite. “He’s getting himself caught. And now he’s a liability. You think the Circle won’t rip the truth out of him? You think they won’t torture him until he spills every secret you’ve got? If they catch him—if they find out what you’re really carrying—we’re all dead. Every single one of us.”

Harleena’s fists clenched so tight her knuckles went pale. She leaned in close, her voice low, fierce, every syllable coiled with fire. “You think we don’t know that? You think this is new to us? We’ve faced worse than the Circle, Ulric. You don’t have to trust us, but don’t stand there and call us fools when we’re the only chance your people have.” Her eyes locked on his, burning steady, unflinching. “We’re not the enemy here. We’re the ones who showed up when no one else did.”

For a long, taut moment Ulric didn't move, his jaw working as if he wanted to spit something back but couldn't shape the words. His shoulders rose and fell with a sharp breath, his face a mask of fury and disbelief. Finally, he turned away, shaking his head as if her words had bounced off stone. He moved toward the next door, every step stiff, bitter. "I can't afford to play your games," he muttered, his voice cutting like a blade in the dark. "My people need me. They don't need more risks."

Harleena's eyes followed him, the heat in her chest shifting to something heavier, harder to name. Anger, yes, but threaded with something close to pity—because she saw it then. His fury was a mask, same as Rabbit's grin. He wasn't just angry. He was scared, burning himself alive with it. She drew in a long, steady breath, forcing the fire in her veins into resolve instead of rage.

"Fine," she whispered under her breath, gripping her rifle tighter. "Don't trust us. But we're getting those kids out. Whether you believe in us or not." And with that, she turned from the vent and followed, ready to prove not just to Ulric, but to herself, that the Crows weren't reckless fools chasing chaos. They could be salvation. Tonight, they had to be.

Jack stalked the orphanage corridors with the two Circle soldiers trailing close behind, the boards under their boots groaning with each hurried step. His pulse pounded in his throat, but his face was all nerves and urgency, exactly what he wanted them to see. He hunched his shoulders slightly, muttered half-curses under his breath, wiped imaginary sweat from his brow—the perfect picture of a grunt scared of shadows and desperate for backup. On the surface, he was just another faceless pawn in their fire-born crusade. Underneath, every nerve was a live wire, his mind racing, counting each second, each turn. He needed to get them to Harry's trap. Needed it fast.

Behind him, the soldiers whispered, their voices hushed but still loud enough for Jack's sharpened ears to catch. "Emberwing's losing it," one muttered, glancing around nervously. His mask fogged with each quick breath, the metal glinting faint in the firelight seeping through cracks in the walls. "If we don't find Stoneborn soon, he'll torch this whole godsdamn place, kids and all. Man's got no brakes."

The other gave a grunt of agreement, voice hard but tired, like he'd repeated the thought too many times already. "Yeah. And the brats won't talk. Not a word, not a scream worth a clue. Emberwing's past patience. If we don't drag Ulric out by his neck, he's pulling us back. Orders from above. The boss doesn't like to wait."

Jack's jaw tightened. Their words cut like knives. Dadinho and Boquinha—two kids he hadn't even met, but already knew by name—were in another room, taking Emberwing's "lessons." And these soldiers were casually discussing whether they'd live or burn, like the choice was an item on a checklist. It hit Jack in the gut, twisted the simmering anger into something sharper, colder. They were running out of time. If they didn't move fast, those kids were nothing but leverage turned to ash.

He pushed the pace, turning corners quicker, forcing the two soldiers to keep stride. His chest tightened as the intersection came into view—the spot where Harry should be waiting with that summoned monstrosity. Jack's eyes flicked to the shadows, searching for the mass of writhing

arms and twisted faces, for the horror that would scare these bastards out of their masks. But the corner was empty. Dead. Silent.

His heart dropped. The creature was gone. Harry must have lost control. Jack felt panic scratch at the back of his skull, cold and quick, the kind that could spiral if he let it. But he didn't. He shoved it down hard, burying it beneath instinct. No time for panic. No time for mistakes.

Jack stopped mid-step, turned fast. The soldiers froze, startled. Before they could speak, Jack had his pistol out, the barrel pressed hard against the temple of the nearest man. His voice came out low and lethal, no longer the jittery grunt but the steel of a man who'd survived more than fire and shadows. "End of the line, boys," he said, calm as a noose tightening. His eyes flicked between them, cold and sharp. "I'm not who you think I am."

The first soldier's eyes widened behind his mask, the fog of his breath suddenly frantic. His body stiffened, a tremor running through him. The second soldier's hand twitched toward the nozzle slung at his hip, but Jack tilted the gun just enough to make the meaning clear: try it, and your partner dies first. The air thickened, heavy with gunpowder, smoke, and the kind of fear that sticks to the walls long after the shouting ends.

Jack's heart still thundered beneath his ribs, but his hand didn't shake. He leaned into the moment, into the power, every line of his body screaming confidence. The disguise had fallen, but the game wasn't lost. Now, it was his table, his stakes.

The sudden change left both Ember Circle soldiers wide-eyed, their expressions flipping from confusion to anger. Before the second soldier could even react, Harry emerged from a room further down the hallway, a gun in his hands aimed directly at him. The boy's eyes were fierce, his stance unwavering. A split second later, Harleena stepped out from another side room, her gun raised as well, pointed at both men. She had come back, from where she left Ulric last.

"Drop them," Harleena ordered, her voice steady and firm. The two Ember Circle soldiers looked around, realising they were surrounded, completely outgunned.

The first soldier cracked first. His weapon slipped from his grip, the clang of it hitting the floor far too loud in the tense silence. His shoulders sagged, a bead of sweat rolling down beneath his mask. The second soldier hesitated, eyes flicking from Jack's gun to Harry's, then to Harleena's. He breathed hard through his mask, a low rasping sound like a forge bellows. His pride warred with survival—but in the end, survival won. The weapon fell, the thud dull against the scorched boards. Both men stood empty-handed, cornered rats with their backs to fire.

Jack exhaled slowly, relief curling in his chest, but it wasn't enough. Two captured soldiers wouldn't stop Emberwing. Two prisoners wouldn't scare off seven elites. They needed more, something bigger, something the Circle itself feared. And then the thought struck him, a memory cutting through the haze like a blade—Jackie Comber. The man who commanded shadows like they were dogs on a leash. The man who had told Jack once, in that mocking, velvet voice, *"I'm helping you because you're not finished yet…"*

Jack's eyes flicked to the broken ceiling beams above, to the patches of black deeper than firelight could explain. His voice rose, sharp, carrying not just to the soldiers but to the darkness itself. "I hope you're still watching," he said, the words almost a taunt, almost a prayer. His chest

tightened as he let his tone shift from command to plea, every word pulling from that memory of Jackie in the lamplight, eyes alight with secrets. “If you’ve ever cared about this city, about these kids, about us—then show it. Right now. We need you.”

The corridor seemed to draw tighter around them. The shadows in the corners thickened, a weight pressing at the edge of their vision. The air cooled, cutting through the heat of the fire as if night itself had reached inside the building. The soldiers stiffened, their eyes wide behind their masks, breaths coming faster. They could feel it too—the sudden sense that something vast and unseen was paying attention.

Jack kept his gun steady, but his heart pounded in his ears. He wasn’t sure if Jackie Comber could hear him, wasn’t sure if he’d just bet their lives on a ghost of a promise. But he’d made the gamble anyway, because that was what the Crows did. They gambled, and they won—or they burned.

The gamble paid off.

Out of the darkness, two shadowy figures bled into existence, sliding from the corners of the corridor where the firelight could not reach. At first they were only smudges against the wall, amorphous shapes that bent the light wrong, silhouettes rippling as though they were drawn in smoke. Then the shadows thickened, edges sharpening until the figures stood tall and undeniable—humanoid but not human, their outlines wavering as if reality struggled to contain them. They moved without sound, without weight, without hesitation.

The Ember Circle soldiers froze where they stood, eyes wide behind their masks, the bravado stripped clean in an instant. One of the shadow-beings turned its head, a gesture so unnervingly deliberate it made the air tighten. Its faceless gaze found Jack. The silence stretched—then the thing gave a slow, deliberate nod, as if acknowledging him, as if answering the call. Jack felt his breath hitch, not from fear but from the enormity of what he had just gambled on—and won.

Before either soldier could move, the shadows closed in. Ink-dark hands slid from the figures, curling like smoke made solid, seizing arms and shoulders in grips far stronger than flesh. The soldiers convulsed, their muffled shouts strangled before they fully left their throats. And then—just like that—they were gone. The shadow-things pulled them backward, bodies vanishing into the dark like stones swallowed by water, leaving only the faint scrape of boots against the floorboards as the last trace of their existence. When the light steadied again, the corridor was empty. The two Ember Circle soldiers had been erased, as though they had never walked those halls at all.

Harleena’s eyes went wide, her gun dipping just slightly as the tension snapped out of her body. She muttered under her breath, shaking her head in disbelief, “That power is freaky.” Her voice carried no humor, only wary respect, as if she had just seen the edges of a storm too large to fight.

Harry was still staring at the place where the soldiers had stood. His knuckles were white on the grip of his pistol, his chest rising too fast. “Way too powerful,” he said finally, his voice tight, awe tangled with a thread of fear. He couldn’t shake the image of those figures—empty yet aware, silent yet commanding. They weren’t tricks of firelight, weren’t illusions. They had weight. They

had purpose. And the thought that such beings might be listening always, lurking just out of sight, sent a shiver crawling down his spine.

Jack holstered his weapon with slow precision, his face unreadable but his eyes alive with something fierce. He drew in a steady breath, grounding himself. The path forward was clear now—the shadows had seen to that—but the mission hadn't changed. If anything, the stakes had doubled. He turned to the others, his voice steady, iron laid over stone. "We're not done yet," he said, gaze sharp and unyielding. "We find Rabbit. We get those kids. No more delays."

The fire crackled faintly somewhere deeper in the orphanage. The shadows pressed close, listening. And the Crows moved, carrying with them the chill of knowing they were no longer the only hunters in the dark.

Rabbit Foot gritted his teeth and let the soldier haul him through the smoke-choked corridors, every yank on his arm biting deeper into muscle and leaving bruises he'd feel later—if later came. The air was heavy with the mingled stench of scorched wood, kerosene, and something sourer beneath it, the stink of fear soaked into plaster. Rabbit's boots scraped across the warped floorboards, his body slack as if he had resigned himself to capture, but his eyes—quick, sharp, unblinking—missed nothing. He counted turns, noted cracks in the walls, and traced every torch bracket in his mind. Pain didn't matter, nor did the soldier's grip grinding bone against sinew. What mattered was the cool weight against his wrist, the hidden knife up his sleeve, a sliver of steel like a secret prayer waiting to be spoken. He let the Circle brute drag him deeper into the belly of the orphanage, closer to the heart of danger, because Rabbit wasn't gambling on escape. He was gambling on timing.

They stopped at last in front of what had once been a laundry room, its stone walls darkened by years of mildew. Now, it had been turned into something crueler: makeshift cells rigged together with scrap iron and chain, crude bars hammered across doorways, hinges shrieking whenever they moved. Inside, wide-eyed children huddled together, their small faces pale in the gloom, their bodies pressed tight as if proximity alone could shield them. A pair of cracked lanterns hissed on the walls, their sputtering glow casting long shadows that made the bars seem thicker than they were. The soldier shoved Rabbit forward with the casual malice of a man tossing meat to wolves, one hand reaching for the latch with every intention of slamming him in with the others. That was when Rabbit moved. In a single breath, the slack weight in his body vanished. He twisted his arm free with a sharp torque, the knife slipping into his palm as naturally as a card sliding from a deck. He pivoted on his heel, and with the soldier's own momentum as leverage, drove him down onto the stone floor hard enough to rattle his teeth.

The Circle man's gasp was sharp, shocked, but it cut off fast under the press of Rabbit's blade at his throat. Rabbit leaned close, lips quirking into a smirk that didn't quite hide the coldness in his eyes. His whisper was silk edged with steel. "You boys really need to practice your hospitality. Not exactly the way to keep a guest comfortable." He pinned the man with one knee, hand steady as iron on the knife, then flicked his gaze to the cells. Dozens of small eyes stared back, frightened but desperate, their breaths shallow as if noise alone might bring fire down on them. Rabbit softened his voice, quick but careful, the gambler's confidence turning into something steady, almost parental. "Alright, kids. Listen close. Quiet as ghosts. We're walking out of here together." He glanced at the crude locks on the cells, smirk twitching again as the game shifted in his favor. "And with a little luck, nobody's gonna hear us until it's too late."

Rabbit didn’t waste time savoring the victory. With a sharp crack against the flagstones, the soldier’s body slumped into silence, and Rabbit stripped the iron ring of keys from his belt in one swift motion. The lock on the makeshift cell fought him for a moment—rust, grime, and poor craft clinging to every link—but the right key turned, and with a metallic snap, the chain fell loose. The children didn’t surge forward at once. They lingered in the bright cell, eyes wide and uncertain, their thin bodies trembling like dogs that had been kicked too many times. Rabbit crouched low, his tone hushed but firm, coaxing them out with the same voice he’d use to calm a skittish gambler across a table. Slowly, hesitantly, they began to move, and with each step out of the cage a spark flickered in their faces—hope, fragile and trembling, but alive. Fourteen boys in all, most no older than ten. Their bruises were badges, cuts lining cheeks and lips like cruel signatures of captivity. The sight tore at Rabbit’s heart, but he pushed it down. Pity wouldn’t carry them out of here. Movement would.

One of the older boys—hard-eyed for his years, maybe ten—stalked past Rabbit and glared at the unconscious soldier sprawled on the floor. Without hesitation, he clenched his tiny fist and smashed it down onto the man’s nose. The crunch was sharp, and blood spattered across his knuckles. The boy’s voice cracked with fury as he spat, “That’s for hurting us, you bastard!” Rabbit didn’t stop him. He saw the trembling in the boy’s shoulders, the catharsis breaking through fear, and he knew better than to steal that moment. Sometimes vengeance was medicine. He only gave a small nod, approving, before gesturing for the group to fall in line. That’s when he saw them—two tiny boys crouched together in the corner, twins no older than three, their knees pulled to their chests as they whispered soft roars at one another, pretending to be dinosaurs in the middle of hell. Rabbit’s throat tightened. He couldn’t even imagine what monsters in their heads looked kinder than the ones outside. He scooped them both up, one under each arm, their tiny hands curling instinctively against his chest, and turned to the others. “Let’s go. Quiet, quick. Ghosts in the dark, all of you.”

Their small procession slipped into the hallway, the children’s bare feet whispering against the dust-caked boards. Every creak felt too loud, every shadow too long, but they moved, steady and silent, with Rabbit carrying the twins like fragile bundles and the others clustering close behind. That’s when the figure stepped out of the dark—Harry, his face pale in the glow of a guttering lantern, his eyes tight with urgency. “Rabbit,” he hissed, the words coming fast, sharp, like arrows. “We need to get out of here. Now.” His gaze flicked to the crowd of children, then snapped back to Rabbit, his jaw tightening. “But there’s a problem. Two more kids—Emberwing’s got them. He’s torturing them. And he’s not alone. He’s got elites with him.”

Rabbit’s eyes darkened as the sounds of fire and footsteps echoed faintly through the orphanage halls. “We can’t leave them behind, Harry. These kids, all of them, deserve better,” he said, his voice low but edged with iron. There was no hesitation in him—no question about what had to be done. Harry shifted the twins in Rabbit’s arms, his own face drawn and tense, eyes flicking nervously to the smoke seeping under the doorframes. “Be careful with the Blackwood twins,” he whispered, his voice taut with memory. “I just ran into Ulric, and he warned me about them. He said… they’re different. Dangerous, even. But they’re also innocent. We need to protect them.” Rabbit glanced down at the little boys—one thumb in his mouth, the other’s small hand knotted into his sleeve—and his chest tightened. Dangerous? They looked like nothing more than children who’d wandered too far from their dreams. Yet he had lived in Doskvol long enough to know when to take a warning seriously. His nod was slow, deliberate. “Alright. Innocent or dangerous, they’re still ours to protect. And we will.”

He carefully passed the twins into Harry's arms, steadying them before letting go. The weight of the little bodies seemed to change the wizard's stance, his thin frame stiffening as if bracing against more than just fire and smoke. "Keep them close, Harry," Rabbit murmured. "If Ulric's right, they're more than just kids—but they're still kids. Don't forget that." Harry gave a sharp nod, his jaw tightening. Harry's face lit up with an idea. "I'll keep the twins with me for now. We can go look for the cell where they're holding the girls. The girls will know how to care for the little ones better than we can. They'll keep the twins calm." Rabbit hesitated for a moment, then nodded. It made sense. The girls were likely to be gentler with the kids, and it would be a safer option. "Alright," he said. "Let's get them to safety, Harry. I'll send the older boys along the safe path we used before." The two Crows shared a determined look before they set their plan into motion. The older boys clustered near Rabbit, wide-eyed but quiet, waiting for direction. He crouched to their level, forcing calm into his voice, weaving confidence into every word. "Back lane, blue rag on the fence, straight to the street. Stay low, stay fast. No detours, no noise. You're ghosts tonight, you hear me?" The boys nodded, some trembling, others glaring with defiant fire. One—the same who had broken the guard's nose earlier—muttered fiercely, "We're not scared anymore." Rabbit allowed himself a quick grin, ruffling the boy's hair. "Good. Now run like ghosts." He watched them vanish into the black, pride and dread twisting tight in his chest.

Then it was just him, Harry, and the twins. They pressed deeper into the orphanage, the air thick with smoke and the distant cries of children. When they reached the chamber where the girls were held, the muffled whimpers reached them first—thin, broken sounds clawing at Rabbit's ears. He stopped them short, crouched low in the shadow of a half-collapsed arch. His eyes narrowed at the sight of a Ember Circle soldier pacing before the cell, the glow of the fire-torches throwing his mask into grotesque silhouette. Every few steps, the man muttered under his breath, the impatience of a bored guard itching for a fight. Harry leaned in, his voice barely a whisper, "What's the plan, Rabbit?" Rabbit's lips twisted into that gambler's smirk again, though his eyes were hard as cut glass. "Plan's simple," he murmured, pulling the knife from his sleeve, its blade catching the faint glow. "We're not leaving without those girls. You keep the twins safe, and stay ready. I'll deal the first hand." His voice carried the steady menace of a man who'd made this gamble too many times and survived it anyway. With that, Rabbit melted into the shadows, every movement calculated, every breath slow—his next gamble about to begin.

Rabbit Foot moved silently down the corridor, each step carefully calculated to slip by the guard unnoticed. The air was thick with the sour stench of smoke and damp plaster, and his ears caught every faint creak of the old orphanage boards. He held his breath, eyes fixed on the soldier's back, counting the rhythm of his pacing like it was a game of cards where one wrong move meant ruin. His knife gleamed faintly in the dim light, ready, but luck wasn't on his side this time. A floorboard groaned under his weight—sharp and accusing. The guard stiffened, spun on his heel, and his eyes widened in sudden alarm. For a heartbeat the world froze—then the muzzle came up, the gleam of copper and steel catching the firelight, and the Ember Circle soldier fired.

The shot ripped through the corridor like thunder, the muzzle flash bursting against the dark. Rabbit's heart lurched, knowing he was caught too far forward, too exposed. But before the bullet could find him, Harry threw himself into its path. His skin rippled, stone erupting over flesh in jagged patches just as the shot struck. Sparks flew where metal met stone, the bullet skittering away in a screeching ricochet. But the redirection was merciless—the round careened past Harry's shoulder and into the cell beyond. One of the girls inside cried out, the sound thin

and sharp, as the bullet carved a grazing line across her leg. She fell back clutching the wound, the other children gasping in terror, their faces pressed against the bars.

Harry's chest heaved, the stone cracking slightly where the bullet had hit, his face tight with pain. The twins in his arms shrieked at the sudden violence, their tiny fingers digging into his collar and shirt as they buried their faces against him. One whimpered like a frightened animal, while the other wailed, their cries echoing against the walls and mixing with the sobs of the injured girl. "Damn it!" Rabbit roared, fury flashing in his eyes. He lunged forward, moving in a blur, seizing the soldier's moment of shock at seeing Harry's impossible transformation. The guard faltered, eyes flicking between the stone-skinned boy and the blur of motion rushing him, and in that hesitation Rabbit struck. He slammed into the man, driving his blade arm aside as the weapon jerked dangerously. Harry, teeth clenched, lifted his stone fists and rammed the soldier against the wall, the impact rattling the rotten plaster and shaking dust from the ceiling. The Circle man snarled, muscles straining as he fought back, thrashing like a wild dog caught in a snare, but Rabbit was already twisting his arm until bone popped and the gun clattered to the floor.

The door to the corridor crashed open with a splintering crack, and Jack and Harleena stormed in. "What the hell is going on here?" Jack barked, eyes locking on the struggle. He didn't hesitate, sprinting forward with his mace raised high. Harleena's gaze darted once to the cell where the children huddled in terror, then snapped back to the soldier. Her jaw set, and without a second thought she grabbed a wooden chair leaning against the wall. She swung it with brutal precision, the wood shattering across the soldier's back in an explosion of splinters. The man cried out, buckling forward, and Jack surged in with a brutal punch, his fist slamming into the soldier's jaw with a crack that echoed down the corridor. The guard collapsed in a heap, unconscious, blood darkening his lip.

For a moment the corridor was filled with nothing but the ragged sound of breathing—the Crows steadying themselves, the frightened whimpers of the twins muffled against Harry's chest, the gasping sobs of the girl wounded inside the cell. Rabbit crouched low, eyes scanning the fallen soldier, hands already reaching for the keys dangling at his belt. "We're not done," he muttered, voice taut with determination. "We've still got to get those girls out—now."

"Nice work," Rabbit panted, chest rising and falling as the last echoes of the fight died in the corridor. Sweat and soot streaked his face, his grin crooked but real. His eyes flicked to the twins, now nestled in the arms of the older girls. They weren't crying anymore—just watching, wide-eyed and curious, like kittens in a storm. Their small heads tilted at every movement, their mouths open in silent awe as if this chaos was a story unfolding just for them. The girl who had taken the grazing bullet pressed her hand against her leg, her jaw tight with pain, but when the twins' worried gazes met hers, she managed a shaky smile. "It's okay," she whispered, her voice trembling but fierce, "everything's okay now." She squeezed one of their little hands, steadying them, her bravery doing more for their nerves than anything Rabbit could've said. Rabbit's chest eased. He knew in that moment he'd made the right call—putting the little ones in the care of their own people. The girls, despite their wounds and their fear, had a strength in them only street kids could muster, the kind you earned by surviving when the city wanted you gone.

Harry exhaled sharply, his stone skin flaking away in places as he let the transformation fade, leaving his arms scratched and raw. His eyes found Rabbit, and for a moment they were just

two men catching their breath between storms. “I think we’re alright for now,” Harry said, voice hoarse with exhaustion but edged with relief. Then his tone hardened, carrying the weight of reality. “But we need to move. Emberwing’s still out there, and he’s not going to let this slide.” Rabbit didn’t argue. He crouched low, putting himself at eye level with the girls, forcing calm into his words, weaving steadiness into his tone like a gambler stacking the deck. “Back lane,” he murmured, pointing, “blue rag on the fence. Straight to the street. The boys have gone already—catch up with them. Stay low, stay fast. No detours, no noise. You’re ghosts tonight, you hear me?” The girls nodded, their faces pale but determined, that peculiar steel shining through their eyes. Rabbit felt a surge of relief. They would make it. They had to. And once they reached the street, the city itself would hide them.

Jack’s gaze was already drifting past them, into the darker stretch of the orphanage where the air smelled of smoke and kerosene, where the deeper fight still waited. His hand flexed around the handle of his mace, knuckles pale. “We’re not done until Emberwing’s taken care of,” he said flatly, voice cold iron. “Let’s finish this.” The Crows fell back into motion, their boots whispering across scorched boards as they maneuvered deeper into the building. The air pressed hot and close, the shadows alive with the crackle of flame and the hiss of unseen nozzles. Each step felt like a heartbeat closer to something inevitable. And then, just before they reached the heavy door at the corridor’s end—the one pulsing with muffled voices and the scent of oil—Ulric appeared.

He slipped out of the shadows like a knife pulled from a sheath, soot clinging to his face, his coat hanging loose and scorched at the edges. His eyes burned, not with fear but with fury barely leashed. Harleena’s rifle snapped up on instinct before she realized who it was. “Where the hell were you?” she hissed, frustration sharp in her voice. Jack’s stare cut just as cold. “You vanish, and now you waltz back in? You better have a damn good reason.” For a moment Ulric bristled, shoulders squared, face defiant as any street leader cornered by older sharks. “I was doing what none of you were,” he spat. “Taking out their soldiers. One by one. From the shadows.” Harleena’s lips thinned, but she didn’t press. Instead, she tipped her chin toward the back of the corridor. “The captives are out. The littles are safe.”

At that, Ulric faltered, just for a heartbeat. Gratitude flickered across his soot-stained face, cracking through the mask of anger. He gave Rabbit, Harry, Harleena, and Jack a short nod, sharp as steel. “Thank you,” he said, and though his voice was rough, the words carried weight. “Thank you for freeing the young ones. But now it’s time to put an end to this.” His hand tightened around the knife at his belt, his jaw set. “I have a plan to blow the last bastards to pieces,” he continued, eyes flashing with the fire of a boy who’d been made into a commander far too soon. “But first—we make sure Dadinho and Boquinha are safe. I’m not leaving this place without them.”

Jack looked at Ulric, then back at the heavy wooden door that muffled the voices inside. He took in one sharp breath, steeling himself. The air stank of oil, smoke, and sweat, the kind of stink that clung to a place after too many hours of fear. “Alright,” he murmured, voice low but certain, “I’ll go in first. If I can buy us even a few seconds, that might be enough.” He adjusted the fire-retardant coat, pulling the mask tight over his face, and pushed the door open with a confidence he didn’t feel. The hinges groaned like traitors, spilling him into a room thick with violence. Emberwing stood in the center, tall and monstrous, his flame-wreathed weapon resting against the floor like a scepter of ruin. Around him, four elite Circle soldiers bristled with their

fire-guns, masks glinting copper in the lamplight. Jack hadn't even finished stepping inside before Emberwing's head snapped toward him. The man's eyes were a blaze unto themselves, sharp and cruel. For a heartbeat Jack thought he had fooled him—just one heartbeat—and then Emberwing's lips curled back into a sneer that cut deep. "You think I wouldn't know my own dogs?" he spat, his voice scalding. "Pathetic rat. Take him." The soldiers' weapons came up in unison, barrels glowing faint in the heat, already primed to spit death.

Jack froze outwardly, playing the part of surprise, but inside his blood was fire and thunder. He knew this would happen, had gambled it might, and he was ready. In one smooth motion he reached into his coat and pulled free the Veil, the arcane charm that thrummed in his palm like a heartbeat not his own. The instant he triggered it, the room collapsed into pitch-black. Darkness poured like ink into every corner, swallowing the lamps, drowning even the glow of the fire-guns. A shout ripped from Emberwing—half rage, half command—and then the wild stutter of gunfire exploded in the confined space. The sharp cracks were deafening, each muzzle flash tearing brief wounds of light into the dark. Bullets whined off stone, tore through plaster, ricocheted in shrieks of metal. Jack's ribs burned as two grazed him, lines of fire across his side and arm, but he grit his teeth and pushed forward. He was the only one who could see through this abyss. Every panicked soldier was a shadow groping blind, and every blind enemy was a chance to move.

And there—against the back wall—two figures tied to chairs. Boquinha was pale, her face gaunt and wet with sweat, hair plastered to her cheeks. Her dark eyes were wide, sharp even through the haze of pain, glaring at Emberwing with a defiance too stubborn to die. Blood streaked her lip, her wrists raw from fighting the rope. Beside her, Dadinho slumped forward, his young frame shuddering with each ragged breath. His shirt was stained with blood and grime, the bright yellow dulled to brown. His nose was swollen, his eye half-shut, but when the shots rang out he jerked his head up, teeth bared, still spitting curses between coughs. They had been beaten, broken down, but not broken through. Emberwing had been demanding answers—Jack had caught the words even before the Veil fell. *Where's Ulric? Where's the thing you're hiding?* Over and over, until the walls themselves had absorbed the question. Jack pushed past the hail of panicked gunfire, blood hot at his side, and whispered under his breath, "Hold on, you two. We're getting you out."

Jack rushed forward, the Veil's darkness wrapping the room in suffocating black, broken only by the stutter of muzzle flashes and the hiss of wild firebursts striking stone. His boots skidded over shattered glass and burning fragments of cloth, every sound a gamble that could give him away. He reached the back wall and found them—Dadinho and Boquinha—tied fast to heavy wooden chairs. Their faces snapped up toward him at the sound of his voice, terror wide in their eyes but hope flickering faint. "Hold on, I've got you," Jack said, low and steady, forcing calm into his tone even as his pulse thundered. His fingers worked at the coarse knots, tugging hard, sawing the ropes against splinters. Bullets whined past, one splitting the chair leg beside Boquinha, sending a spray of wood shards against her cheek. She winced but didn't cry out, eyes locked on Jack like he was the only thing tethering her to survival. Dadinho snarled through split lips, teeth red, muttering curses in a hoarse growl that might have been prayer or defiance.

Across the room, Emberwing's voice roared through the chaos. "Find him! Burn him out! Don't let that rat touch the brats!" His words cracked like a whip, each command sparking another volley of wild fire and blind shots that lit the gloom in strobing flashes. Jack ducked, dragging

both kids low as sparks rained down, his back catching the heat of a grazing flame jet. The stink of scorched fabric bit into his nostrils, but he kept his hands steady, teeth gritted as the final rope gave way. He shoved Dadinho's shoulder, then Boquinha's arm. "Hurry!" he hissed, voice sharp now, all patience gone. "Stay low, straight to the door—don't stop!"

The three of them bolted, slipping through the curtain of darkness. Jack kept tight at their heels, moving like a wall between them and the blind, thrashing Circle soldiers behind. Shots cracked against the doorframe as they burst into the hallway, one ricochet whining inches from Jack's head. Dadinho stumbled, but Jack caught him under the arm, hauling him upright with brute force. Boquinha, blood slick on her cheek, grabbed her brother's other arm, the three of them a ragged knot of survival.

In the hall, Ulric was waiting, his wiry figure taut with tension, every muscle like drawn steel. His eyes scanned his battered crew, then met Jack's. Jack gave a sharp nod, breath coming rough, the weight of his wounds finally pressing heavy into his side. Relief and pain clashed on his face, but determination burned brighter. "They're safe," Jack rasped, shoving the two kids toward their leader. "Now it's your turn, Ulric. Do what you need to."

Ulric's jaw set hard, his young face carved into something older, something ruthless. He pulled Boquinha and Dadinho in tight for half a second, then turned his gaze back toward the smoke-choked room they'd escaped. His eyes burned with a fire that wasn't born of fear but of fury. He nodded once, short and final. "Get out of here. I can handle this." His voice was iron, no room for debate. And then, before Jack could speak again, Ulric slipped past them, his frame swallowed by shadow, his steps silent as a ghost as he moved back into the firestorm—toward Emberwing, toward vengeance, toward the plan only he knew.

The Crows moved fast, boots pounding against the cracked floorboards and then out into the open as the heavy air of the orphanage gave way to the icy bite of the night. Dadinho stumbled, clutching his ribs, Boquinha dragged him forward with stubborn strength, her face streaked with blood and soot. Their breaths came in ragged bursts, each exhale visible in the cold, but no one dared slow down. They bolted through the garden, its weeds blackened and trampled, past the half-buried statues of saints that now leaned like broken watchers in the dark. The city's air hit them hard, raw and alive with coal smoke and salt wind. For a heartbeat, they thought they had outrun the night—then the world split open behind them.

The explosion thundered like the sky itself had caved in. A deep, reverberating boom shook the ground beneath their feet, rolling through the streets in a wave that rattled windows and toppled loose bricks from the orphanage wall. Heat slapped their backs, shoving them forward as fire punched upward into the night. A massive wing of the orphanage tore apart in a bloom of orange flame and black smoke, debris hurled skyward like a volcano of shattered stone and splintered wood. The roar was followed by a rushing silence, a ringing in the ears that seemed to strip the world of sound—until the crackle of fire rushed back in, filling the void with hungry, endless noise.

They turned as one. Jack's eyes went wide, his jaw tight. Harleena froze mid-step, her chest heaving, fists still clenched as if she could fight the inferno itself. Rabbit's breath caught, his normally calm face flickering with raw shock. Harry just stared. For a long, heavy second, all of

them stood rooted as the column of smoke curled higher, flames clawing against the black of the sky, sparks rising like false stars.

“Do you think…” Harry started, his voice quiet, trembling in the heavy air, but he couldn’t bring himself to finish.

Jack answered, low and grim, his voice a stone cutting through the smoke. “Whether Emberwing and Ulric made it or not… we can’t worry about that now. We did what we came here to do. We’ve got the kids. That’s what matters.” His tone was steady, but there was a weight behind the words, a shadow that none of them could ignore.

Then the sound came—the distant wail of Espiritas sirens, carried through the labyrinth of Doskvol’s streets. A cold dread ran through the group as they realized how close they were to being pinned. The sirens grew louder, clearer, mixing with the shouts of neighbors who had gathered in confusion, only to scatter again in panic once the explosion ripped the night apart. People slammed shutters, doors bolted shut, silhouettes ducked back into the safety of their homes. Curiosity was gone, replaced by fear. The street itself felt poisoned, dangerous, ready to betray them to the first authority that turned the corner.

Jack looked at his crew—his family. Harleena, battered but unbroken, eyes still hard with fire. Harry, pale but resolute. Rabbit, calm on the outside but carrying that gambler’s weight in his gut, every decision balanced on a knife’s edge. The kids they had saved were already gone, swallowed by the alleys of Doskvol.

“Come on,” Rabbit said at last, his voice soft but firm, carrying over the distant sirens and the crackle of flame. “It’s time to go. For better or worse… this mission is done.”

And with that, the Crows turned their backs on the fire. They melted into the maze of Doskvol’s narrow alleys, swallowed by shadow and fog. Behind them, the orphanage burned, half-collapsed, the night alive with smoke and screams. The uncertain fate of Ulric Stoneborn and Emberwing hung heavy in the air, unanswered, a question the flames themselves refused to answer.

As the Crows vanished into the night, the city seemed to hold its breath. Doskvol stretched out around them in every direction, its jagged skyline a forest of smokestacks and crooked spires, its canals glinting faintly under the fractured glow of lanterns. The fog rolled low through the alleys, thick with coal dust and salt from the bay, swallowing sound and light alike. But above it all, something new scarred the night—pillars of black smoke rising like crooked fingers clawing at the sky.

From where they stood, the plume from the orphanage burned brightest, licking orange into the clouds. Yet it wasn’t alone. To the north, near the factories of Coalridge, another column churned upward. To the west, beyond the crowded tenements of Ashvale, a second rose. Farther still, near the tangled rooftops of Hexspire, a third, and over the Old Port, a fourth—each one a wound cut into Doskvol’s already battered skin. And then, faint but unmistakable on the horizon, a fifth: smoke curling up from inland, from the ironclad heart of Ironscar Keep itself.

The sight froze the city. Dogs howled from darkened courtyards. Bells tolled in different districts, confused and overlapping, carrying warnings no one understood. The citizens of Doskvol

peered from shuttered windows and whispered to each other, voices trembling. Something was happening—something bigger than any one street, any one gang.

But for the Crows, running low through the alleys with soot on their faces and children at their heels, there was no time to stop and wonder. They had their victory, bitter and uncertain as it was. The questions—the fate of Ulric, the shadow of Emberwing, the meaning of the smoke at Ironscar—would wait for another day. Tonight, Doskvol burned.

Chapter 5: **Crows at the Crater**

The next morning crept into Doskvol like a thief with muddy boots. Fog lay heavy on the street outside, the kind that turned lamp posts into smudges of dull yellow and blurred the outlines of roofs into something half-seen. Harry leaned against the upstairs window frame, his breath leaving faint streaks on the glass as he tried to stay low, out of sight. Twenty minutes now he'd been staring through the curtains, watching the dark blue carriage parked at the neighbor's door. The Imperial Police crest glinted faintly on its side, the silver scales dulled by soot and grime. An officer stood at the stoop, helmet tucked under one arm, his stance rigid as a bayonet while the neighbor talked to him with nervous, fluttering gestures. Harry's heart thudded with each exchange, his mind spinning through what they could be saying. The explosion in the bin—it had to be that. Cuzao's wild flare of desperation. Reckless, yes. But desperate times made desperate brilliance, and the Stoneborn kids had desperation in spades.

He tried to read their bodies, but subtlety was never Harry's trade. The neighbor's hands twitched in that way people had when they lied—or when they were just frightened of uniformed men. The officer's chin tilted, sharp, calculating, but not accusatory. Harry squinted, willing himself to see more than he really could. Were they talking about him? About the Crows? No—he didn't think so. The neighbor didn't glance toward the house, didn't shift his weight like a man betraying secrets. Still, Harry's gut twisted with the uncertainty. In this city, silence could be loyalty or cowardice, and either could kill you just the same.

The creak of a hinge broke him out of his thoughts. A sound from below—the familiar scrape of a boot on wood, the subtle shift of air as a door closed. Rabbit was back. Harry startled at how completely he'd missed it, how easily the man had slipped past his notice, walking right through their garden while he'd been too busy staring across the street. He muttered under his breath, annoyed at himself. A mistake like that could cost him his skin one day. Rabbit moved like smoke, and if Harry couldn't keep track of his own ally, what hope did he have against enemies?

He drew the curtain shut and stepped back from the window, forcing his shoulders to ease though the knot in his chest stayed tight. Whatever the police were sniffing after, he couldn't do a damn thing about it from up here. Better to hear what Rabbit had turned up. If anyone had answers, or at least the shape of them, it was him. Harry padded downstairs, the boards groaning underfoot, the air growing warmer with each step toward the kitchen hearth. He caught sight of Rabbit through the open doorway, dust still clinging to his coat, the edge of his grin sharp as a blade even in the morning light. Harry felt the tightness in his chest ease a fraction. Time to listen. Time to plan.

The kitchen smelled faintly of coal smoke and last night's bread, the hearth still warm from Harleena's early fire. The curtains were half-drawn, letting in a slant of pale morning light that cut across the rough wooden table, catching on the sheen of tin mugs and the curve of a kettle steaming faintly on the stove. Harleena stood with her back to the window, a handful of scraps in her palm as she fed her dog—an eager, wiry creature that wagged its tail with such force it thudded against the cupboard door. She wasn't smiling, not really, but there was a softness in her face as she bent to offer another piece, the kind of gentleness that only came when she thought no one else was watching.

Rabbit filled the doorway as if he'd been there all along, his coat dusted from the street, the brim of his hat casting a shadow across his sharp grin. He leaned one shoulder lazily against the frame, speaking as though his words were part of the room itself rather than an announcement. "...and you would not believe the mess in town. Everyone was talking about it. The Blade Chronicle stand I passed was already sold out. Citywide attack, they're calling it. Multiple fires.

The orphanage wasn't the only one." His voice carried that gambler's rhythm, casual on the surface, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of unease as they tracked the way Harleena's dog snapped up the last scrap.

Harleena straightened, brushing her hands together, her mouth a firm line as she glanced at him. "That explains why it took so long for the authorities to show," she said, her tone sharp but weary. She tossed the final treat to the dog and crossed her arms, leaning her hip against the counter. "Even after that boy dropped a couple of their men. Usually, the Espiritas are on you like vultures the second someone falls."

Rabbit tilted his head, his grin twitching wider as though he almost enjoyed the absurdity of it. He stepped further in, boots scuffing against the floorboards, and gestured loosely with one hand as if tossing dice. "Jack was right then. They were spread too thin. Too many distractions all at once." He let the thought hang in the air, his eyes sliding from Harleena to the small window above the sink, watching the pale fog roll by outside.

Harleena's brows pulled together, her voice edged with doubt. "The boys can't be that important, right? They're just orphans. Kids." Her tone wavered on the last word, though, betraying the crack in her conviction. She rubbed absently at her wrist, as if trying to scrub off the soot from last night that wouldn't come clean.

Rabbit chuckled once, but there was no humor in it. He tapped his knuckles lightly against the back of a chair, each rap like a card hitting a table. "Weird, isn't it? Maybe the Circle weren't targeting them exactly. Maybe the kids were just… a bonus." His grin faded, replaced by something tighter, sharper. He leaned forward slightly, eyes glinting with the satisfaction of a man about to turn over a card everyone else had been waiting on. "But guess where else went up in smoke last night?"

Harleena's patience snapped. She rolled her eyes, tossing her braid back over her shoulder with a sharp flick. "It's too early for games, Rabbit. Just tell me."

Rabbit didn't make her wait. He straightened, the grin gone now, replaced by something closer to gravity. His voice dropped lower, slower, as though the words themselves were heavier than the air. "Ironscar Keep. Or so they say."

The room stilled. Even the dog froze, ears pricked, head cocked as though it could hear the weight in Rabbit's tone. Harleena's lips parted, but no sound came out, her gaze darting toward Harry, who had just stepped in from the hall.

Harry's brow furrowed, his thin frame tense as he moved closer, fingers drumming absently against the spine of the book he carried. "The prison?" he echoed, his voice thin with disbelief. "A fire there? What the hell would the Ember Circle want in Ironscar?" He leaned against the table, his other hand curling into a fist against the wood, the boy's eyes flickering with a spark of dread that was too sharp for his age.

Rabbit gave him a long look, thoughtful, his mouth tightening as though he were chewing on words he didn't trust himself to say aloud. He shrugged once, the motion slow, deliberate. "I don't know." He turned a chair around and straddled it, resting his arms on the back, his eyes distant now. "But I've got a feeling it wasn't really them. Doesn't smell like Circle business to me. Feels like…" He trailed off, letting the silence fill with implication. His fingers tapped against the wood in a steady rhythm, like a gambler's heartbeat.

Harry leaned forward, unable to leave the silence unbroken. "Is someone manipulating the Ember Circle?" His words came out faster than he intended, the thought escaping before he could measure it.

Harleena scoffed, but the sound lacked conviction. She crossed the room, set her mug down with a soft clink, and said flatly, “Hardly. Stubborn bastards. They don’t take orders from anyone but their own fire.” Her jaw clenched as she spoke, her eyes narrowing on Rabbit as though daring him to argue.

Rabbit didn’t meet her glare right away. He stared past both of them, at nothing in particular, eyes unfocused but sharp all the same. He let the silence linger, thick enough to draw breath from the room, before he finally spoke again. His words were quiet, almost an afterthought, more to himself than to them. “Not impossible, though.”

The three of them stood there in the morning light, the weight of that sentence hanging heavy between them. The dog barked once, sharp and sudden, before settling back down at Harleena’s feet. Outside, the fog pressed closer against the window, smothering the street from view. The floorboards creaked, and Jack appeared in the doorway, tugging his coat off his shoulders as though he’d walked through weather thicker than fog. His hair was damp with sweat, his jaw tight, eyes carrying the heaviness of someone who had seen too much already today. He didn’t wait for a greeting—just crossed the kitchen with long strides and braced his hands on the table, leaning forward into the middle of them.

“Downstairs is a mess,” he said, voice flat but urgent. “The medical center’s already filling. Lazarus was smart to prep it before we left, because people are pouring in. We’ve got three thugs down there right now—Skoulander men by the look of it. Burn marks all over their bodies. Couldn’t risk the hospital, so they came to us instead.” His eyes flicked between Rabbit, Harleena, and Harry, his tone tightening. “Fallout from last night. Still burning.”

Rabbit lifted his chin slightly, the shadow of a grin twitching across his mouth but never reaching his eyes. He leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming a slow rhythm on the wood. “Told you. Circle might’ve lit the match, but it’s the rest of the city choking on the smoke now. Every street corner’s buzzing about it. Fires in Coalridge, Ashvale, Hexspire, the Old Port. And Ironscar.” He spat the word like a bad taste. “Can’t move through a market without someone whispering about it.” Jack straightened, the tension in his shoulders taut like a bowstring. “I need today’s edition of the Blade Chronicle. What’s being printed matters more than what’s whispered. Anyone got one?” Harry shifted in his chair, fiddling with the edge of his spellbook. He gave a thin, apologetic smile. “We’ll have to find one first. They’ve been flying off the shelves since dawn. Every vendor sold out before Rabbit could even think to try.”

Harleena, who had been leaning against the counter, arms crossed, let out a sharp exhale. “So what do we do now?” Her tone cut through the room like glass scraping wood, demanding answers that no one really had. Rabbit tilted his head, expression thoughtful, but his voice quieted to something heavier. “We make sure the Stoneborn brats are safe. That’s priority. Fires don’t matter if the Circle circles back and finishes what they started.” Jack turned to him, eyes narrowing, the steel in his voice sharpening. “Safe isn’t enough. The Stoneborn are fighters, and they’ve already bled for their people. They need more than saving—they need direction. Allies. If we’re smart, we don’t just pull them from the fire, we bring them into the fold.”

That landed like a thrown knife. Rabbit sat forward, his smirk gone, eyes narrowing. “Allies?” His voice rose, incredulous. “Jack, they’re kids. Street rats with knives in their hands and no leash on their rage. You think that’s an army? That’s a disaster waiting to happen. You put your faith in them, they’ll drag you under when the tide turns.” Harleena pushed off the counter, adding her weight to the argument. Her voice was low but firm, her arms tightening across her chest. “Rabbit’s right. We’ve already got enough eyes on us. Bring the Stoneborn under our wing, and suddenly every faction in Doskvol has an excuse to call us child-thieves, or worse. Sympathy goes a long way in this city, and if people think we’re exploiting orphans to do our dirty work? We’re finished.” Harry, who had been quiet until then, leaned forward in his chair, his knuckles

white around the mug he hadn't even touched. "They're more than orphans." His voice cracked at the start but steadied as he went, conviction hardening it. "They survived a Circle attack, same as us. They fought back. That kind of fire doesn't just burn out—it spreads. If we don't stand with them, someone else will, and maybe not for reasons as… decent." He glanced at Jack for support, then back to the others. "We don't need to use them. We just… need to give them a choice." Jack nodded, his tone cold, deliberate. "Harry's right. The Stoneborn kids already see themselves as soldiers. Whether we like it or not, they're in the game. If we step away, we leave them alone in a war they can't win. But if we stand with them…" He let the thought hang, his gaze moving from Rabbit to Harleena. "We give ourselves allies who know these streets better than anyone. They grow into something more than prey."

Rabbit barked out a short laugh, bitter and sharp. He shook his head, running a hand through his hair as though the idea itself was madness. "You're talking about turning broken kids into weapons. That's not giving them a choice—that's dressing chains in velvet. Don't kid yourself, Jack." Harleena's eyes softened for a moment, though her voice didn't. "And even if they wanted it, even if they asked to fight alongside us—what then? Every scar they take is on us. Every one of them buried, it's our dirt on the shovel. You ready for that weight?" The kitchen fell into silence for a long breath, the fog pressing heavy against the windows. The dog shifted by Harleena's leg, letting out a low whine, as if even it could feel the tension simmering in the air. Jack finally spoke, voice low, steady, unwavering. "Better to bear that weight than to walk away and let them die on someone else's terms."

The silence stretched long in the kitchen, heavy enough that even the crackle of the stove fire seemed to hesitate. Rabbit leaned back in his chair, fingers tapping against the table, his gambler's grin worn thin. He gave a sharp exhale through his nose, shaking his head, but his tone softened a fraction. "Fine. Say we do it your way, Jack. Say we reach out to Ulric and see if he's breathing. That boy's tougher than he looks, but if half the city's gossiping about Ironscar and the other half about firestorms, it means he's gone to ground. Getting a word to him won't be easy. I've got someone—an old runner who owes me coin and a favor or two. If anyone can slip a message to Stoneborn, it's him. But don't think for a second that this makes me happy about it." His eyes cut sharp toward Jack, but behind the bite was a reluctant acceptance.

Harry perked up at that, hope flickering in his tired features. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes darting between them like he was afraid the idea might collapse under its own weight. "That's all we need. Just a message. Just to know if they made it out. And if they did, if the kids are still together, we can… we can at least give them the choice." His voice trembled slightly at the word choice, as if it was a fragile thing. He swallowed, eyes lowering for a beat before rising again, firmer. "I don't care if they're kids. Doskvol doesn't let you stay one for long. They've already been fighting for their lives. If we don't help, someone else will turn that fight against them. At least with us, they'd have a chance."

Harleena had been standing so still that her dog nosed her hand, pressing for a treat she didn't have the heart to give. She finally spoke, her voice low, edged with something brittle. "You hear yourselves, don't you? You're talking about pulling children into a war. Doesn't matter that they've already bled, or that they're angry enough to spit fire back. They deserve to rest. To heal. If we drag them into our battles, we're no better than the Circle. Different cause, same cruelty." Her eyes lifted, sharp and unwavering, cutting across all three of them. "I'll fight. I'll bleed. I'll burn this whole city if I have to. But those kids? Don't make them carry our war on their backs."

Jack met her gaze without flinching, though his jaw flexed, the strain of it showing through. His tone came steady, heavy, carrying the weight of command rather than the heat of argument. "Harleena, I hear you. I don't want children in our line of fire any more than you do. But Ulric isn't a child anymore, and he won't let those boys stay children either. The truth is, whether we

speak to him or not, they'll keep fighting. They already are. What I want—what I'm saying—is that we give them the option to fight with us, instead of against the world alone. We offer them a seat at our table. We offer them protection. What they do with that choice is theirs. But I won't leave them without it."

Rabbit rubbed a hand across his jaw, sighing through his teeth, then gave a reluctant nod. "Alright. We reach out. My contact can carry the word, and if Ulric's still breathing, he'll get it. We'll ask him if his kids are safe, ask what he needs. But that's as far as I'll go—for now." His eyes lingered on Harleena, then Jack, before finally settling on Harry, softer than before. "If Ulric wants allies, he'll say so. If not, we walk. Simple as that." Harleena didn't look convinced, but she didn't argue further. Her arms folded tighter, her gaze falling toward the floor as though she couldn't bear to meet theirs, the dog leaning against her leg in quiet solidarity. For now, they had agreed, though the unease in her eyes made it clear: this fight wasn't over—not with the Circle, and not within the Crows themselves.

The ruins of the orphanage looked less like a building and more like a wound carved into Doskvol itself. The yellow police tape fluttered weakly in the breeze, its bright color obscene against the blackened husk of stone and wood. Where the back half of the orphanage had stood was now a hollow crater, its edges jagged and sharp, like teeth gnashing up from the earth. Soot hung thick in the air, clinging to the tongue with its bitter taste, and every shift of wind carried the acrid sting of burnt plaster and melted iron. The Crows picked their way through the debris in silence, boots crunching over shattered bricks and fragments of glass that glittered faintly in the moonlight. Harleena's sharp eyes darted from one ruin to the next, but for once her voice cracked with awe rather than steel. "I knew it was bad," she whispered, her breath leaving a pale cloud in the cold night air. "But this… this is something else."

Harry stayed close, his hands trembling against the worn leather of his spellbook as though he could steady himself through touch alone. The smell of scorched timber pressed against his senses, carrying with it the phantom echoes of children's cries and panicked footsteps. His voice was low, but it trembled with anger rather than fear. "Ember Circle must be desperate," he said, his words heavy with disgust. "You don't come at kids like this unless you're searching for something very specific." The words lingered in the stillness, echoing faintly as if the rubble itself remembered the night.

Jack's stride was heavier, each step marked by a grim determination that seemed to press the weight of the whole scene into his frame. His jaw worked tight, his fists clenched as though he were holding himself back from striking at the shadows. The smell of smoke clung to his coat, seeping into the seams, reminding him of every fire he had survived and every one he had failed to stop. His voice carried that same edge, sharp and dangerous. "They're bastards, that's for sure," he growled, eyes narrowing at the hollow crater. "But Ulric's got to have some answers. He owes us that much." The others fell silent at his words, the night settling heavy around them, broken only by the faint crackle of embers still alive in the wreckage.

The cold pressed in as they waited, creeping through their coats, nipping at their fingers and ears. The ruins were dead-still, as if even the rats had abandoned them, and in that stillness every sound carried sharp. The crunch of gravel under Jack's boot, the rasp of Harleena's sleeve as she shifted her rifle strap, the quiet rasp of Harry's nervous breathing. And then, faint but deliberate, the sound of paws against the debris. Jack's head lifted, his gaze cutting through the gloom. A stray dog padded toward them, ribs showing through its mangy coat, but its steps were too sure, too purposeful. Its jaws clenched around a plastic bag that swung gently with each stride. Jack's eyes narrowed, suspicion burning. "That doesn't look right," he muttered, moving toward it with wary caution.

Harry's skin prickled with a different sense, the hair on his arms rising as he drew in a sharp breath. His voice was taut, urgent. "There's something… powerful about this. Be careful, Jack." Jack crouched as the dog approached, his breath fogging in the cold, his gloved hand reaching out. The dog didn't resist; it released the bag into his palm with unsettling obedience, its dark eyes reflecting the faint glow of the fires behind them. Jack pulled the plastic open, and the world seemed to lurch. Inside lay a severed head, its flesh pale and waxy, lips stretched into a grotesque rictus grin. The smell hit him first—copper and rot, thick enough to gag. Jack stumbled back, bile in his throat, but the horror didn't end there. The lifeless eyes snapped toward him, pupils swiveling unnaturally, and its jaw twitched. Then came the voice—low, rasping, yet unmistakable. A voice they all knew.

The severed head lolled slightly in Jack's hands, its waxy lips twitching as Ulric's voice carried through it—low, resonant, unsettling in the way it didn't belong to flesh that was already dead. The Crows stood frozen in a half-circle, the pale light of the fires painting their faces in uneasy hues: Harry wide-eyed with awe, Harleena's nose wrinkled in disgust, Rabbit sharp-eyed and calculating, and Jack grim but steady.

"Let's keep this brief," Ulric's voice said, filling the night as if the head were a hollow vessel carrying something far larger. Harry leaned closer, his breath catching, and whispered, "Magic… ventriloquism magic. He's nearby, using the head as a conduit." His fingers twitched at the spine of his spellbook as though itching to unravel it. The revelation sent a shiver through him, but his tone held something like reverence.

Harleena, by contrast, recoiled visibly, one hand tightening on her rifle strap, the other clenching into a fist. Her lip curled in revulsion. "You've got to be kidding me. Ulric, really?" she called into the shadows, her voice sharp and scornful. "We can't meet in person?" The head shifted unnervingly, its lifeless eyes rolling toward her just enough to make her flinch. Ulric's voice cut back, cold and measured. "Despite your help, I don't trust you, Crows. We talk like this for now."

"Paranoid much?" Harleena snapped, her shoulders stiffening, but Jack raised a hand—a warning gesture that froze her before she could spit more venom. He stepped closer, his shadow looming long in the firelit rubble, and spoke with deliberate calm. "We're not here to play games, Ulric. We need to know about the kids. Are they safe?" The silence that followed pressed heavy, and then the head croaked again, Ulric's tone clipped. "The children are fine. They're being taken care of. That's all you need to know."

Jack's jaw tightened. His nod was curt, but the anger flickering in his eyes betrayed him. He shifted his weight forward, boots grinding on the ash, his voice taking on the hard edge of command. "Look, let's be real. The Ember Circle isn't going to let this go. They're coming after you again, and next time it'll be worse. You need allies." The head tilted, its glassy stare unblinking, and Ulric's reply came with suspicion threading every syllable. "Allies? With the Crows? Why would I put my kids' lives in your hands?"

A muscle worked in Jack's jaw as he forced down his irritation, his tone lowering but gaining intensity. "Because you don't have much of a choice. We've already proven ourselves—we saved those kids last night. And if you try to go at this alone, you won't make it. Not against the Circle. Not against what's coming." His words echoed through the skeletal remains of the orphanage, but the silence that followed was heavier than before. Harleena exhaled sharply, tossing her braid over her shoulder, muttering under her breath about wasting time, but Jack didn't waver. When no answer came, he finally shook his head and turned, his coat snapping in the cold wind as he muttered, "Fine. Have it your way, then."

"Wait." The voice cut back, sharper this time, almost reluctant. Jack froze mid-step, glancing over his shoulder with a raised brow. The head twitched again, and Ulric's tone had shifted—still

guarded, but tinged with something softer. “An alliance. But it’s going to be on my terms.” Rabbit stepped forward at that, his grin subdued but his eyes bright with curiosity. He folded his arms across his chest, cocking his head. “What terms are those?”

The head seemed to glance between them, as though weighing their worth. Ulric’s voice, when it came again, was quieter, almost stripped bare. “Help me protect these children. That’s it. I’m not looking for power, or control, or coin. I just want the orphans of Doskvol safe. If you can do that, if you’ll stand for that, then I’ll consider an alliance.”

Rabbit’s expression shifted, his usual gambler’s smirk fading into something steadier, more sincere. His voice came softer than the others had heard in a long while. “We can do that.” The night seemed to hold its breath as his words hung in the air, binding them closer to a path none of them could fully see.

The severed head sagged slightly in Jack’s grip, its glassy eyes fixed on nothing, but Ulric’s voice still carried through it—rough with fatigue, but underpinned with that stubborn edge of defiance that defined him. “I hope, for all our sakes, you’re telling the truth, Crows.” The sound wove through the ruin like smoke, lingering in every corner of the gutted orphanage. The Crows stood rigid, the cold night air wrapping around them, their breath steaming in uneven clouds. For a heartbeat, no one dared break the silence—until Jack’s voice slid in, calm but sharp, like a blade being drawn.

“One more thing, Ulric,” he said, his words deliberate, his tone leaving no room for doubt. He shifted his weight forward, shoulders squared as though facing Ulric in person instead of through a grotesque messenger. “We both know your territory has lost ground to the Circle since the attack. I plan to take it back—and I want to know if you’ll stand in our way.” The words landed heavy, like stones thrown into still water, rippling through the group. Rabbit’s brow shot up, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips as though he’d just heard the start of a game he hadn’t been invited to. Harleena stiffened, her hands balling into fists at her sides, her jaw clenching tight enough to ache. Harry blinked, his lips parting, confusion and curiosity flashing in his eyes. None of them had known Jack was harboring this plan, and now here it was, spoken aloud with the same authority he used to settle wagers or give orders in the field. None of them contradicted him, not with Ulric’s magic still crackling faintly in the air, but the silence between the Crows was thick with questions unasked.

The pause stretched, broken only by the faint creak of collapsed beams shifting in the wind. Finally, Ulric’s voice seeped back through the head, slow and measured. “No,” he said at last, the word carrying more weight for its restraint. “I won’t stand in your way.” His tone hardened as he continued. “In fact, if you’re serious about it, I’ll provide you with everything I know—secret passages, choke points, the best angles of attack. I don’t wish to fight the Crows for that ground. You take it, keep it, bleed the Circle from it.” The head’s lips twitched grotesquely as Ulric’s words darkened. “But I want their heads. Every last Circle bastard you find. Burn their names from this city, and leave their corpses in the dirt.”

Jack’s expression tightened, the faintest flicker of satisfaction pulling at the corner of his mouth. A grim smile—not joy, not triumph, but something colder, a predator baring its teeth. He inclined his head as if Ulric were truly before him, sealing the pact. “Fair enough,” he said, his voice a gravelled promise. “It’s a deal.” At once, the unnatural tension in the air slackened, the magic pulling back like a tide. The severed head lolled lifelessly in his hand, its grotesque vitality gone. The stray dog, silent as ever, turned and padded back into the night, its paws whispering against the ash before it vanished into the labyrinth of Doskvol’s alleys. The four Crows stood together in the ruin, the only sound the faint hiss of dying embers, the stench of charred wood still thick enough to cling in their throats.

They looked at one another, and the truth of what had just happened weighed on them all. Harry's wide eyes tracked the shifting shadows, his lips pressing into a thin line. Awe and unease fought in him, and he whispered more to himself than to the others, "The way he used that head… the reach of it… this isn't some gang boy playing soldier. Ulric's something else. Something powerful." His gaze lingered on the rubble, his breath shaky as if he half expected Ulric's voice to seep back out of the stones. Harleena scowled, rubbing her thumb along the edge of her rifle as if to ground herself. "It's disgusting," she muttered, her tone hard but laced with unease. "Talking through corpses, hiding behind tricks. Doesn't matter how clever he is—it isn't right." Rabbit said nothing at first, only tilted his head, the faintest glimmer of interest sparking in his eyes as if he were weighing a hand of cards no one else could see.

Jack finally broke the silence, turning toward the others with a look carved in iron. "We strike back. We reclaim the territory, and we make sure the Circle knows the Crows aren't prey. They touched the Stoneborn kids—our answer is going to make them regret it." His voice was low, even, but in the wreckage of the orphanage it carried like a verdict. He glanced toward Rabbit, his jaw set. "Time to start planning." Rabbit's lips quirked into a small, sharp smile, his eyes narrowing with wry amusement. "Planning, eh?" he murmured, stepping closer until the torchlight carved shadows across his face. "It's about time you start telling us about this plan we made… without our knowledge." The words weren't venom, but they weren't light either—a challenge wrapped in humor, the gambler daring Jack to finally lay his cards on the table.

The night around the ruins was still, broken only by the distant crackle of fire and the occasional groan of collapsing stone. Far from the reach of torchlight, beneath a cluster of gnarled trees, Ulric stood cloaked in shadow. His sharp eyes never left the Crows, who lingered by the gutted orphanage, speaking to the severed head he had animated with a magic not his own. The faint echo of his own voice, carried by stolen sorcery, drifted across the night air before it guttered out. Ulric's jaw was tight, his young face gaunt beneath the soot, the edges of his expression sharpened by the cold glint of calculation.

Beside him, Dadinho crouched low with his rifle braced against his knee, the cracked scope catching what little moonlight filtered through the branches. His scowl was etched deep, still swollen from Emberwing's fists. Cuzao leaned close, whispering impatiently, "What are they saying?" His voice carried the rasp of smoke still lodged in his lungs. Dadinho snorted, not looking away from the glass. "How the hell would I know? The scope gives me sight, dumbass, not ears." His tone was sharp, defensive, the edge of someone still burning from too much loss. Cuzao muttered something back under his breath, but Boquinha's voice cut through before the argument could rise. "The magic's run out," she said quietly, her gaze fixed on Ulric, eyes older than her years. "We can't talk to them anymore."

"That's fine," Ulric answered, his voice low, steady. "We've said enough." He didn't move, his body taut as a wire, his gaze still locked on the shadowy silhouettes of the Crows as they turned and began to leave, their words lost to distance but their intent still written in the sharp lines of their bodies. His silence stretched, heavy, until Boquinha spoke again, her voice edged with doubt. "Do you trust them?" Cuzao shrugged, scratching at the soot on his jaw. "Well… they did help us." Dadinho, unable to hold his tongue, barked back, "Help? That asshole tried to erase my mind, Ulric! Don't trust them." His voice cracked with fury, with memory, his hand tightening on the rifle stock until the wood creaked.

Ulric's eyes narrowed, the firelight from the ruins catching faint in their depths. Thoughtful, calculating, he let their words hang before he spoke. "I don't fully trust them either," he admitted at last, the words flat, measured. "But they're useful for one thing. If they mean what they say about striking the Circle, then we can use them to find who we're looking for." Boquinha's breath

hitched, and she asked softly, “Are you sure he escaped that explosion?” The doubt trembled at the edges of her voice, but Ulric’s hand rose to the chain hidden beneath his scorched shirt. He drew it free, the Umbral Key glinting in the pale light, its shape etched in cruel, impossible angles. His thumb pressed against its surface, and his jaw hardened. “The Key doesn’t lie. I can feel him still alive. If only I could find him.”

The three children stared, their young faces lit by both awe and unease as Ulric closed his fist around the artifact. For a moment, the weight of its power lingered in the air, thick enough to raise gooseflesh. Then Ulric tucked it back beneath his clothes and straightened, his silhouette resolute against the ruined skyline. “Let’s go,” he said finally, his voice steady, commanding. “We need to pay more visits to that old fool of a man. We need to gather our strength again.” Without waiting for their reply, he turned and strode deeper into the trees, his steps sure, unhurried. The children followed, Boquinha silent, her face set, Dadinho and Cuzao already bickering again in low, bitter tones. Their voices trailed into the night, swallowed by the fog, leaving only the echo of Ulric’s determination behind.

News: Fires of Chaos - The Day Horror Descended on Ashvale

Elara Voss: *"Doskvol was thrown into disarray yesterday as a series of barbaric attacks ripped through the heart of Ashvale, leaving both citizens and authorities stunned by the scale and brutality of the violence."* She paused, her eyes narrowing at the newspaper spread out before her. "You know, I knew it was going to be bad when we got that call for help from the Crows. But reading it now, seeing it in print... it's another thing entirely. And to think the Cyphers even offered to help, though they were too far to make it in time."

Thane Draven: *"The simultaneous explosion at Ironscar Keep added another grim layer to the day's events..."* he read aloud, shaking his head. "That whole thing was a mess, wasn't it? But what really catches my attention is this bit about a hot-air balloon and *'bearing the colours and emblem of a known criminal faction.'* They're pointing fingers at the Gloam Sisters, right? But they don't outright say it. It's like they're suggesting it without actually incriminating them. It's... it's clever."

Elara Voss: "You noticed that too, huh? They're implying just enough to make the Gloam Sisters look guilty without committing. Typical Blade Chronicle trickery. The Crows were deep in this mess, Thane. I wonder how much pull they have with the Blade Chronicle. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

Thane Draven: "So you think the Crows have connections in the press? Wouldn't surprise me. *'As Ashvale and the rest of Doskvol reel from these attacks, questions are being raised about the effectiveness of the Imperial Police."'* He read the line aloud, almost mockingly. "The Crows have never been fans of the authorities. Wouldn't take much to grease a few palms and make the police look incompetent while keeping their own hands clean."

Elara Voss: She tapped the table with her fingers, her brow furrowing. "It's not just about making the Imperial Police look bad, Thane. This entire setup—especially with the balloon carrying the Gloam Sisters' colours—it's calculated. It's not them, I'm sure of it. The Gloam Sisters are many things, but reckless isn't one of them. They're being framed." She paused, her eyes flickering with a hint of admiration. "And quite frankly, it's a smart move by Emberlash. He knew the exact buttons to press."

Thane Draven: "Yeah, I suppose. I mean, the article goes on to say, *'Many believe that the emblem was that of the infamous Gloam Sisters. The involvement of such a shadowy and mystical faction raises questions about their motives."'* He shook his head. "They're definitely being thrown under the carriage for this one. But what I don't get is why. What does Emberlash gain from blaming the Sisters?"

Elara Voss: "It's about positioning, Thane." Elara leaned back, her gaze distant as she thought it through. "Think about it. If Emberlash shifts the blame to the Gloam Sisters, he not only puts more pressure on them—potentially taking out a rival—but he also confuses the rest of us. Who do we fight? Who do we side with? The Gloam Sisters are already distrusted by most of Doskvol. Throwing them under suspicion for something like this just makes it harder for any of their allies to come to their defence. It's chaos. And Emberlash thrives on chaos."

Thane Draven: "You think the Crows are playing both sides? It feels like they're part of this whole mess too, but they get off scot-free in the article. Almost makes it seem like they're the heroes for being there."

Elara Voss: She snorted, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Oh, they're in it, alright. But heroes? No. They're just trying to survive like the rest of us. And maybe, just maybe, they're trying to get a foothold where they can. The Crows aren't the type to take sides unless there's something to be gained from it." She paused, looking down at the printed words once again. "They could be working

with the Gloam Sisters or against them. I wouldn't put it past Jack to play both angles if it means keeping his people safe."

Thane Draven: Thane's eyes glinted with amusement. "Heh. *'For now, the streets of Ashvale remain under heavy surveillance... But as the smoke clears and the damage is assessed, one thing remains clear—Doskvol's fragile peace has been shattered."*" He closed the paper and sighed. "They're right about that. Fragile peace, indeed. And I'd wager this isn't the last we hear of it."

Elara Voss: "No, it isn't," Elara agreed, her expression darkening. "We'll have to tread carefully, Thane. The Crows, Emberlash, the Gloam Sisters... They're all playing a dangerous game, and we're caught right in the middle. But one thing's for sure." She looked at her subordinate, her eyes cold. "If the Ember Circle thinks they can get away with something like this without retribution, they're dead wrong. We need to be ready to act, regardless of where the pieces fall."

Thane Draven: Thane grinned, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "Then let's give 'em hell, Elara. Let's show Emberlash that Doskvol isn't his playground, and that the Ember Circle isn't untouchable."

Elara Voss: Elara gave a firm nod, her expression resolute. "Agreed. But remember, Thane—we don't just go rushing in. We need information, leverage, and allies. We need to be smart about this." She looked out towards the bustling street beyond their small hideout, the echoes of Doskvol's chaos never far away. "We move when the time is right. And when we do, they won't know what hit them."

Thane Draven: He tapped the edge of the paper with his finger, his brow furrowed. "Here it is—the part that rattled me most. '*Explosion at Ironscar Keep… thirty-one inmates attempted to escape… twenty-three caught, eight unaccounted for.*' And look at the names, Elara. These aren't petty thieves. This is Merrow's old crew. The Royal Gang. I thought they were buried for good when he got locked away."

Elara Voss: Her eyes narrowed as she reread the column, lips pressing into a thin line. "*Edwin Grieves, Victor Crowe, Mitchell Marlowe, Felix Coyle, Callum Dorne, Branagh Vey…*" She recited the names slowly, almost tasting them like poison. "That's not coincidence, Thane. Out of all the hundreds rotting in Ironscar, it just so happens that Merrow's lieutenants are the ones who slip the net? No. Someone wanted them free. And if you ask me, Merrow himself had a hand in it. One way or another, this was his play."

Thane Draven: He leaned back in his chair, exhaling sharply, the chair legs creaking under him. "So you think Merrow's back in the game? Thought he was a ghost story, locked away and waiting for the gallows. Now, with his old dogs off the leash, it feels like the city's about to choke on that ghost all over again." He gave a humorless chuckle. "Royal Gang tearing through Doskvol again… Saints save us."

Elara Voss: She shook her head, voice hard. "Don't fool yourself, Thane. This isn't the Royal Gang of old—not yet. But Merrow doesn't need his full army to sow chaos. Just the names alone bring fear back to the streets. He thrives on that. The Ember Circle light the matches, and Merrow fans the fire until no one knows who's really pulling the strings. It's a clever mask. The Circle take the blame, the Sisters take suspicion, the Police take the shame… and Merrow rebuilds his kingdom in the shadows."

Thane Draven: His lips twisted into a smirk, though his eyes betrayed unease. "City barely recovered from his last circus, and now the clowns are back on the street. Eight of them, scattered who knows where. That's enough to make any district bleed. If Merrow really is free—or even if he's just pulling wires from a hole in the ground—Doskvol's about to relive its worst nightmare." He tapped the paper once more, his tone darkening. "Mark my words, Elara. This isn't just smoke and chaos. This is the opening act."

With a shared understanding, the two fell into silence, each already thinking of what their next move would be in the intricate game of power and survival that Doskvol had become.

Chapter 6: **Mysteries Beneath the Darkened Veil**

Harry jolted awake with a strangled gasp, the echo of fire still licking the inside of his mind. He lay there in the tangled sheets, his skin slick with sweat, his heart pounding as though he had sprinted across half of Doskvol. The dream clung like smoke—he had been back in the Black Marrow, sitting helplessly in the shadows while Ladher's bioweapon hissed like a living thing, while Adrian Blackwood screamed and bled under its touch. He'd watched, powerless, as the man crumpled, the life snuffed from his eyes—and Harry had done nothing. He *couldn't*. To blow his cover would have doomed them all. The guilt crawled through him even now, sharp as a brand pressed into flesh. He sat up slowly, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. How deep had they gotten themselves into this? Was this war against the Ember Circle really their fight—or just another distraction while something larger and darker coiled unseen around the city?

The light through his window was pale blue, a sky far too calm for what burned in his chest. Harry pushed the blanket away, swinging his legs to the floor, the boards cool underfoot. He forced himself to breathe, long and slow, but the unease only thickened. It wasn't the dream anymore. It was *something else*. His skin prickled, the fine hairs on his arms rising, his gut curling with a pressure he knew all too well. His gift—or curse, depending on the day—whispered to him. Magic. Power. Strong, close, pressing against the walls like a storm trying to get in. Only this storm was already inside. His throat dried. Whoever it was, they weren't just some hedge-witch or spirit dabbling in cheap tricks. This was someone who carried weight, someone who hummed with danger.

Harry rose, every step from his bed to the door placed carefully, soundlessly, his pulse pounding in his ears. The house creaked faintly around him, its old bones betraying even the smallest movement. He moved quickly but low, the way he'd learned on nights where discovery meant death. The sensation grew sharper with every step toward the lower floor, until it pressed against his ribs, each inhale taut with invisible pressure. He slowed at the bottom of the stairs, his breath shallow, ears straining. Voices drifted from the kitchen—low and warm, threading with something Harry hadn't heard from Harleena in too long. Laughter. Real laughter. He froze. His stomach twisted, not with relief but with something far meaner, hotter, a knot that pulled his insides tight as wire.

Her laugh carried again, followed by the faint, rhythmic thump of her cane corso's tail against the leg of a chair. The dog's deep growl rolled low in its chest as Harry edged closer, the beast's instincts sharper than his own stealth. Harry pressed against the doorframe, peering in through the crack. The smell hit him first—coffee, rich and bitter, laced with the faint acrid tang of tobacco smoke curling like a phantom through the air. Harleena sat at the table, her posture loose, her hand absently scratching behind the dog's ear as she leaned toward the man across from her. A man whose trench coat still glistened faintly with rain, whose blond hair was deliberately tousled into rakish disarray, whose half-smile carried the kind of confidence Harry could never fake. Constant.

The wizard raised his mug with casual ease, the steam curling up around his face as if even the air obeyed him, and tipped it in Harry's direction. His eyes gleamed, sharp and knowing, catching Harry like a knife point. "Hey, lad," he said, his voice rough silk, carrying an effortless familiarity that set Harry's teeth on edge. The greeting should have been nothing—but it burrowed deep, sour in Harry's chest. Because Harleena's eyes had already softened when Constant spoke, her laughter still clinging at the edges of her lips. Because Constant didn't have

to force respect from the room—it settled around him like a cloak. And because Harry, standing there in the doorway, could feel the truth of it gnawing at him: power, easy as breathing, was Constant's to command. For Harry, it was still a fight just to be seen.

Harry stepped into the kitchen, trying to school his face into something neutral as the cane corso rumbled low in its throat, then settled once Harleena lifted a hand. She didn't look at Harry—her eyes were fixed on Constant, her mouth curved in the faintest trace of a smile. Constant leaned back in his chair, one arm draped casually over the backrest, his cigarette dangling from his fingers. The smoke coiled lazily upward, mingling with the smell of strong coffee and burnt bread from the stove.

"So there I was," Constant said, his voice smooth and unhurried, "standing in the middle of some backwater tavern out in the Dagger Isles. Room's thick with smugglers, all of them drunk, half of them armed, and not a single bloody one of them happy to see me. Barkeep's glaring like I've just spat in his pint. So I do the only sensible thing, don't I?" He lifted the cigarette to his lips, took a long drag, and exhaled smoke in a slow ribbon that curled between them. "I tell them all I'm the tax collector."

Harleena snorted, shaking her head. "You didn't." Her dog pressed its head into her leg, and she absently stroked its ear, eyes never leaving Constant.

"Swear on my last decent coat," Constant replied, grinning as though he'd only just thought of it. "And do you know what? Half of them were so terrified they emptied their pockets on the spot. Coins, trinkets, even a bloody gold tooth. The other half tried to stab me, but…" He gestured vaguely toward his coat, the faint scorch marks visible along the edge of its sleeve. "Let's just say their knives didn't quite make it home."

Harry pulled out a chair and sat, the scrape of wood on stone sharper than he'd meant it to be. The table felt smaller now, the air thicker, as though Constant's stories had filled every corner. Harry leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, trying to look as though he belonged in the laughter, though it had come before him.

Harleena smirked, the sound of her laugh softer this time. "Only you, Constant, could bluff an entire tavern with nothing but a straight face and a stolen story. What happened to the gold tooth?"

Constant flicked ash into a chipped saucer, his grin curling like smoke. "Sold it to a dentist on the docks. Man never asked whose mouth it came from. Easy coin, and I left with all my fingers attached, so I call that a win." His eyes slid toward Harry then, sharp and amused, as if measuring how much of the story he'd believe—or how much he wished he could have lived it himself.

Harry cleared his throat, the words sharper than he intended as they cut into the tail end of Constant's grin. "So, what are you doing here?" His tone carried more weight than simple curiosity, the kind of question that wanted a boundary drawn as much as an answer given.

Constant smirked around his cigarette, tapping ash into the saucer again. "Funny you should ask, lad. Just when the whole city's up in smoke, I find myself drifting back to your doorstep. Thought maybe the timing meant something." He leaned forward slightly, his trench coat creaking, and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial rumble. "Two nights ago, firestorms all across Doskvol, and who comes out smelling of roses? Not the Circle, not the Sisters, not the bloody Police. No—it's the ones who walked clean out of Ironscar in the middle of the blaze."

Harleena's brow knit as she reached for her mug. "The escapees," she said flatly. "The ones the Chronicle listed—Merrow's old lieutenants." Her tone carried no surprise, only a kind of tired recognition.

Harry rubbed his hands together as if to banish a chill. "Convenient, isn't it? All those names tied to Merrow, and suddenly the Circle sets half the city alight while his crew strolls out the back gate? What are the odds?" His eyes narrowed, his voice low. "You think Emberlash's working for him?"

Constant chuckled without mirth, shaking his head. "Not for him. Emberlash doesn't take orders—never has, never will. But manipulated? Twisted in the right direction? Absolutely. Merrow's clever like that. He sets the board, lets men like Emberlash think they're making the moves. By the time they realize, the game's already lost." His gaze lingered on Harry, the weight of his words meant as much for him as for Harleena.

Harleena leaned back, stroking her dog absently as its tail thumped against the floor. "So what do you suggest, then? If Merrow's pulling strings from the shadows, what's the counter?"

Constant's smile returned, thinner this time, tinged with something deliberate. "I might have a place. Not far, and not quiet, but useful. A little hole where whispers crawl before they hit the streets. But it's not a one-man errand, not if I want to come back with skin intact. I'll need the Crows."

Harry exhaled sharply through his nose, leaning back in his chair. "Great. Another diversion. Just what we need—something else to drag us off course." His words were edged, but before he could go further, the kitchen door swung open.

Jack and Rabbit stepped inside together, coats still damp from the mist outside. Jack's eyes scanned the table with sharp curiosity, while Rabbit's grin flickered the moment he saw Constant. He leaned against the doorway, arms folded, his voice a gambler's drawl. "Well, well. Guess the family reunion started without us." Jack's gaze locked on Constant, unreadable but intent. "Alright then," he said quietly. "Let's hear it."

Constant's smirk didn't last long; it slipped into something harder, a steel edge under the cigarette smoke. He tapped the ash into the saucer and leaned forward, elbows on the table, his trench coat whispering as it shifted. "There's an old man in Doskvol named Mister Trickerium. A relic, if you like. Used to be one of the founding minds behind the Ashvale University's magic studies course. Brilliant, dangerous, and—if the whispers are to be believed—mad as a rat in a drain. He hasn't shown his face in years. Locked himself away in his estate like a spider in a web." His voice lowered, every word measured. "And I received a message. A plea for help. Someone inside wants out."

Harry's eyes flicked up sharply, a tremor of unease pulling at his features. He drummed his fingers against the table, the rhythm fast, restless. "Disappeared, you say? Locked up in his own house, no one's seen him in years, and now you get some secret cry for help? That's not a mission—that's bait." His tone cracked with suspicion, though beneath it was something else: the tightness in his chest that always came when he realized Constant was walking two steps ahead of him.

"Exactly," Constant said, unbothered, almost amused by the suspicion. He leaned back again, smoke curling around his sharp profile. "Trouble waiting to happen. Which is why I don't walk into it alone. I plan to infiltrate his house, find my target, and pull her out before she becomes another story whispered through the streets. But don't mistake him for some doddering hermit. Trickerium is a master of magic. The kind who can line his walls with wards you won't even

notice until you're bleeding from the ears. His reputation's older than me, and it's built on traps that chew up men braver than most."

Jack, silent until now, shifted in his chair. He crossed his arms slowly, his eyes narrowing. His voice was calm, but the weight in it pressed like a stone. "Ambitious," he said simply. "But magic isn't our trade. We deal in blades and shadows, not wards and charms. Walk us into the wrong hallway, and we're corpses before we know we've stepped wrong. How do you expect us to handle his defences?"

Harry nodded sharply, latching onto Jack's words. "He's right. We've pulled through against worse odds, sure, but this?" He shook his head, staring down at his hands as though already imagining the blood on them. "We're skilled, but we're not trained mages. Not like you. This turns into a nightmare the second Trickerium wakes up and realizes we're in his den."

Harleena, who had been watching the exchange with her chin propped lazily in her hand, let out a soft laugh, the sound cutting through the heavy tone like a blade across glass. "You could help us, couldn't you, Constant?" Her voice was light, almost playful, but her eyes gleamed sharp. She straightened, brushing her dog's head absently as its ears pricked at the tension. "We've got our own little storm brewing soon. A raid. A plan that could use a touch of magic. Something to sweeten the deal, as you'd say. If you want our help, maybe you toss a little of yours back our way."

Constant's grin returned, sly and measured, curling like smoke. He tapped ash from his cigarette, eyes sliding from Harleena to Jack, to Harry. "Negotiation. I like that. Always better when the scales tip both ways. If the price is right, I might consider lending you a spell or two. Something to keep your feathers unburned." His tone shifted then, dropping low, serious again. "But first, the rescue. One thing at a time, loves. Trickerium's house won't wait forever."

Constant let the silence stretch just long enough to make it uncomfortable before he leaned back, smoke curling from the corner of his mouth. "So. Can I count on you, then? The heroes of Doskvol," he said with a mocking tilt of his head, his smirk razor-sharp, "the white hats of the criminal world." His tone dripped with sarcasm, each word dangling between amusement and contempt.

Harry felt the sting of it deep in his chest, like Constant had pressed a thumb on a bruise only he could see. His fingers twitched against his knee, the urge to snap back almost overwhelming, but he swallowed it. He didn't say a word, not with Harleena looking so at ease with the man, not with Jack's steady eyes watching. Still, the taste of it lingered—bitter, choking—like smoke he couldn't exhale.

Jack cleared his throat, his voice cutting steady through the quiet. "You've told us what you *plan* to do. Now tell us more about this 'cry for help.' Who is she? What's she to you?" Harleena's gaze sharpened too, her posture straightening. But Constant just shrugged, flicking ash from his cigarette with infuriating calm. "Don't know much," he said, a thin smile playing at his lips. "Message came short, sharp, desperate. No names, no details. Just a hand reaching out of the dark. That's enough for me."

He turned then, his eyes sliding to Rabbit with sudden focus, and the playfulness slipped from his face. "But before we even think about setting foot near Trickerium's walls, I'll need something only you can provide." His words were sharp now, deliberate. "Tell me, Rabbit—do you still have the Umbral Ring?"

The air in the kitchen froze. Even the dog lifted its head, ears twitching as though it had felt the shift. Jack's arms tightened across his chest, Harleena's eyes narrowed, and Harry's breath caught, every hair on his arms rising. Rabbit didn't answer right away; his jaw flexed, his

gambler's mask slipping under the weight of old secrets. Finally, his voice came low, steady, but edged with unease. "Yes. I've still got it."

Constant's eyes gleamed, not unkindly, but with the sharp hunger of a man seeing the final piece fall into place. "And have you been studying it?" he asked softly, leaning forward. Rabbit let out a sharp breath, his fingers tapping once against the table before falling still. "Studying, maybe. But not much beyond the page. Every time I even *think* about tapping its power, I feel it. Like something standing just behind me. Breathing down my neck. Watching." His eyes flicked up, a shadow of defiance there. "Not exactly inviting."

Constant nodded as though that confirmed something he already knew. His voice dropped lower, silk over steel. "That's because it isn't just an artifact—it's a door. And what waits behind it doesn't like to be ignored. But I'll need you to open it. Just enough." He stubbed out the cigarette, the last curl of smoke rising between them. "You see, last time I had dealings with Trickerium, we didn't exactly… part on good terms. He laid a curse on me. A hex, if you like. Keeps me from stepping foot anywhere near his property. It's like being shackled by the air itself—an invisible lock, tailored to me. If we're to walk into his den, that lock needs breaking. And your Ring?" His eyes lingered on Rabbit now, intense, unblinking. "That's the key."

Harry's chair scraped back suddenly, the wood groaning against the floor. His voice cracked with anger, his hand smacking against the table. "That's dangerous. You're asking him to play with something that isn't meant for anyone to touch. We've seen what these artifacts do. They burn more than fingers." His words were fast, sharp, like he had to spit them out before his fear choked them off.

But Rabbit sat still, his eyes locked on Constant. The gambler's grin was gone, replaced by something quieter, older—like a man weighing a bet where all the cards were face-down. Slowly, he nodded. "I'll do it. One more time. If it gets us in, then I'll do it."

For the first time that morning, Constant's smile wasn't sardonic or sly. It was small, genuine, almost tired, but warm in its own crooked way. "Good man," he said softly, leaning back as though the decision had been inevitable. "Didn't doubt you for a second."

The Umbral Ring dangled heavy in Rabbit's hands, an object that looked more stolen from a nightmare than forged by human hands. It was a wide golden circle, the surface rough in places like worn bone polished by too much touch. From its lower rim hung five long spikes, tapered and sharp, swaying faintly with the weight of their own menace. At its center sat a triangular plate, engraved with jagged, ancient lines, and staring out from that triangle was a single, unblinking eye. The eye wasn't alive, not truly—but the longer one looked, the harder it was to dismiss the sense that it *saw*. Every shadow seemed to pool around it, every breath seemed to echo through it, as if the ring were less an object and more a presence that had followed them into the room.

Harry felt it first. The hum of magic, like a struck tuning fork vibrating not in the air but in his bones. He stood a step apart, arms crossed, trying to look composed while his pulse thumped unevenly. His gaze never left Rabbit, sharp and intent, searching for signs of something his friend might not even know was happening. The moment Rabbit lifted the Ring higher, Harry could almost swear the air thickened—like walking into a storm's pressure moments before the lightning breaks.

Rabbit began the ritual with steady hands, drawing each movement as he'd been taught—but Harry noticed the subtle shifts. The little flourishes, the deliberate pauses. His own lessons woven in, tiny improvements meant to make the spell stronger, steadier. He hoped—*damn it, he hoped*—that Constant was watching closely. If Constant saw, then he would understand Harry's worth. The glow began, faint at first, then growing. The Umbral Ring's eye caught the light and

gave it back, burning gold like a coal stoked to life. The glow spread in slow waves, spilling across the kitchen until Constant was bathed in its warmth. Constant's smile broadened—relief, release, or something Harry couldn't name. And then they all saw it: Rabbit's shadow bending wrong, splitting for a heartbeat into two jagged silhouettes before snapping back into place.

Harry's breath caught. His eyes darted to the glow—and for the briefest moment, he swore it flickered, like a lantern struggling against wind. "Rabbit," he said, his voice tight, urgent. "Maybe it's better if you stop this." But the ritual pressed on, the glow straining, stretching, holding them all in its grip. A long, suffocating moment passed—and then, as suddenly as it had surged, the glow subsided, easing back into the quiet shades of morning. Harry blinked against the sudden calm, his chest tight, his heart hammering in his ears. He glanced from face to face, searching for confirmation, and finally said, "Did anyone else see that?"

Harleena spoke first, her voice softer than usual, worry cutting through her tone. Her dog pressed against her leg, whining low. "I saw it. Felt it. What was that?" Rabbit's eyes lifted, their edges shadowed but steady. His voice was calm, though it carried a weight none of them could name. "Whatever it was… it was close this time." Harry's jaw set, his hand flexing against his book. "Then maybe we should study this thing more before using it again. We're playing with fire." Jack stepped in, his tone clipped but decisive. "Agreed. But what's done is done. Are you free now, Constant?"

For a long moment Constant didn't answer. He sat still, one hand pressed against the table, as though testing the edges of his own skin. His eyes were unfocused, somewhere deep in thought. At last he exhaled, slow, almost reverent. "I believe so, Jack." He looked up, offered Rabbit a thin smile that carried more weight than words. "Thanks, mate. I owe you." Then he straightened, the old half-smile tugging back to his lips, cigarette ember glowing faint at the corner. "Now… I suppose it's time we plan a visit to that old fool of a man."

The air felt too still as the Crows passed through the gates of Mister Trickerium's estate. The hinges of the wrought iron groaned like an old throat clearing, and the metallic squeal lingered in their ears even after Constant had pushed them fully open. The sun struck the bars at their backs, spilling long shadows across the gravel path that crunched beneath their boots. A faint smell of damp earth and roses clung to the air, a scent too delicate for a man rumored to lock himself away in solitude. Harry's skin prickled as he trailed behind, one hand brushing unconsciously over the worn spine of his spellbook, the other clenched into a fist at his side. His senses were buzzing. The magic here wasn't overwhelming, but it was *present*, humming like static in the marrow of his bones. He hated that Jack was right—Trickerium might very well have bottled spells ripe for the taking. And if Jack wanted them, Harry would have no choice but to stand by and watch while the power he craved slipped into someone else's hands.

Rabbit's eyes lingered on Constant as they moved forward, catching the man's confident stride, the cigarette dangling lazily from his lip, the faint curl of smoke unraveling in the morning light. Rabbit said lowly, "Do you think it worked?" The words carried the weight of the ritual they'd forced from the Umbral Ring, the shadows that had bent too far just two nights before. Constant smirked without breaking his pace, but his eyes—those tired, sharp eyes—betrayed something more fragile beneath. "There's only one way to find out." He crossed the threshold, each step deliberate, almost daring the unseen curse to strike him down. The others held their breath. The seconds passed. No sudden force threw him back, no fire licked at his boots, no unseen chain wrenched him from the ground. Constant let out a slow breath, then turned, his half-smile twitching into something almost genuine. "It must have worked. Let's move."

The house itself loomed over them as they approached, its walls a pale gray stone veined with ivy, windows shuttered but not broken, as though the place slept rather than decayed. Its presence pressed down on them, heavy, as if the building itself were aware of their intrusion. Jack strode ahead with his usual assuredness, his coat brushing against the hedges, his boots thudding against the stone steps. He raised a hand and knocked, the sound cracking through the silence and echoing back at them like it had traveled down a long corridor. He waited, jaw tight, eyes flicking across the shadows of the garden. Nothing. No footsteps, no shuffling, no voice behind the door. Only silence. “Well, that’s reassuring,” he muttered, the sarcasm edged with unease.

Harry’s gaze swept the garden, and something gnawed at him. The hedges were neat, the grass trimmed, the flowerbeds fresh with buds just beginning to open. His stomach twisted. “Something’s not right,” he said quietly, his voice sharp enough to cut the silence. “If this place is so secluded… who’s keeping the garden alive?” He gestured with a tense hand at the roses, their petals trembling in the morning air, too vibrant, too *present*. His words set the others on edge, eyes darting across the grounds, hands brushing instinctively against weapons, charms, or books.

That’s when Jack spotted him—a lone figure bent at the far edge of the garden, a spade in hand, back curved with the steady rhythm of labor. A man tending a patch of soil as if he had all the time in the world. Jack’s eyes narrowed, suspicion and curiosity warring across his face. He stepped forward, boots crunching over the gravel, his voice carrying across the quiet. “I’ll check it out.” The others held back, watching, tense. Jack’s shadow stretched long across the trimmed lawn as he closed the distance. “Excuse me!” he called out, voice sharp, commanding. The gardener froze, back still turned. Jack slowed his approach, his tone sharpening. “Have you seen Mister Trickerium around?” The question seemed to hang heavier than it should, as if the garden itself had been listening.

The gardener straightened slowly, dirt clinging to his gloves, his weathered face drawn into lines that spoke more of honest labor than deception. His brow furrowed, eyes flicking across the group with unease. “No, I haven’t seen him in ages,” he said, his voice low and gravelled, carrying the accent of the lower districts. “Doesn’t come out much. Doesn’t *need* to, far as I can tell. His payments arrive like clockwork—always folded neat, left on the sill by the kitchen window. I pick ‘em up, do the work, leave the tools back where I found ‘em. Haven’t seen a soul go in or out for months. Who are you lot, anyway?”

Jack tilted his head, his face a mask of calm but his eyes sharp, calculating. “So, he’s been living there all this time?” The question wasn’t meant for the gardener, not really; it was for himself and the crew. He shifted his weight, boots scraping the stone, eyes locked on the dark windows of the looming house. The gardener’s gaze lingered on him a beat too long, suspicion plain, before he bent back to his work, muttering something about “folk asking for trouble.”

Meanwhile, Harleena drifted along the perimeter like a shadow, her cane corso padding silently at her side. She tested shutters with gloved fingers, ran her palm along ivy-choked walls, crouched low to peer at foundations slick with moss. After a full circuit, she returned, brushing dust from her trousers. “All the windows are closed tight,” she reported, her tone clipped. Her gaze darted once more around the building. “And it’s odd—there are no back or side doors. Just this one front entrance. A house this size, with one way in?” She shook her head, braid sliding over her shoulder. “Feels wrong.”

Constant’s cigarette burned down to its end, ash spilling unnoticed across his coat. He exchanged a look with Harry, a look that needed no words. Harry’s lips parted first, voice hushed but weighted. “I can feel it,” he admitted, pressing a hand against his temple as if it could dull the buzzing behind his eyes. “There’s an immense amount of magical energy

radiating from this house. It's… unsettling." His voice cracked on the last word, a mix of fear and fascination.

"Too much power for one man to wield," Constant added, his smirk long gone, replaced with a narrow-eyed wariness. His gaze roamed the stone walls, the roofline, the dark slits of windows. "And Trickerium was never known for sharing. Every inch of this place is likely a trap." His words hung, thickening the air, until even the gardener seemed to hurry his work, as if eager to be away.

The Crows lingered in uneasy silence, breaths visible in the cool air. Finally, Constant strode forward, boots crunching gravel, trench coat flaring faintly in the breeze. He bent slightly, flicked the last of his cigarette into the dirt, and with a sharp motion opened the letterbox. The squeal of the rusted flap echoed far louder than it should have, bouncing back like a whisper carried through stone. He leaned close, voice rough silk but edged with command. "Trickerium! We know you're in there! Come answer!" The words bled into the silence. A crow cawed once in the distance, sharp and mocking, then silence pressed back in. The house seemed to breathe. The ivy trembled though the air was still. The ground beneath their boots carried a faint thrum, as though some buried heart had just stirred awake. Harry stiffened, his spellbook pressed tight against his chest, every instinct screaming that the house was listening. Jack's voice cut in, low but steady, trying to pierce the dread. "You feel that?" His eyes slid to Rabbit, to Harleena, then back to the door. "It's alive." Constant's mouth twisted into a humorless grin, though his eyes betrayed no amusement. "Aye," he said softly, almost to himself. "And it already knows we're here." The silence deepened. Every breath felt heavy, stolen. The first challenge wasn't the door itself—it was daring to cross it.

Jack's eyes flickered with sudden inspiration, the kind that came sharp and reckless, the kind that never asked permission. He held up a hand to the others, the shadow of a grin twitching at his lips. "Play along," he muttered under his breath, then turned his gaze on Constant with a sharper edge. "Especially you. At least for now."

Constant raised a brow, half-smirk, half-challenge, but said nothing. Jack didn't give him the chance. He stepped closer to the door, pitching his voice louder, sharper, the conman's tone dripping with bravado. "We're here for a purpose! We've brought Constant as our prisoner. I heard you don't really like him, isn't that right?" The words rang in the silence, bouncing off the thick wooden frame of the house, a calculated taunt meant to stir the recluse inside.

For a long moment, nothing. The air itself seemed to wait, pressing in heavy around them. Then came the sound: faint shuffling, uneven footsteps moving across floorboards. A chair scraped against wood. A cough, harsh and dry. Then, unmistakable and deliberate, the clatter of locks being undone—one, then another, then another, each metallic snap like the turning of gears in a trap winding tight.

The door creaked open, just a sliver, enough for a pair of wary eyes to glimmer out through the darkness. Rabbit's Foot and Harry locked glances, adrenaline surging hot through their veins. That was all the invitation Rabbit needed. "Now!" he barked, and together he and Harry shoved forward with sudden force. The door gave way under their combined weight, slamming inward with a groan of old hinges—striking the man on the other side. There was a muffled cry, and as the Crows spilled into the house, they saw the old figure collapse to the ground, blood beginning to trickle from a fresh cut on his forehead where the door had caught him.

The smell struck them next. Not of mildew or rot, but roses. The air was rich, perfumed, almost cloying, as though a garden had been crushed into every corner of the house. Harry faltered, blinking, because what he saw did not match what he had expected: not dust, not clutter, not cobwebs. The interior gleamed with impossible order. Not a single mote of dust clung to the

surfaces. The wooden floors shone faintly in the light of the lamps, polished to perfection. Every surface was immaculate, every object aligned with deliberate precision, as though the entire house had been scrubbed clean of the very concept of time. It was unnatural. Too clean. Too deliberate. A pristine perfection that rang false in a city like Doskvol, where soot crept through every crack and dust gathered the moment one turned away. Here, there was none of that. Only the sharp, heady sweetness of roses filling their lungs—except where it was broken now, violated, by the sight of dark blood dripping steadily from the old man's brow, staining the flawless floorboards.

"Mister Trickerium!" Rabbit called, his voice echoing strangely in the pristine silence. The response came not from the walls, but from the ground, where the old man lay, his thin body sprawled on the polished wood. His striped pajamas clung loose to his gaunt frame, a fraying robe trailing from his shoulders. His wild beard spilled across his chest in tangled waves, already touched by drops of red from his wound. He glared up at them, his sunken eyes burning with indignation, his pale skin flushed crimson with rage. The pristine house around him seemed to hum faintly with his fury, the roses in the air somehow sharper, more bitter. His voice, hoarse but commanding, lashed at them like a whip. "What manner of ruffians barges into an old man's home like this?" he roared, spittle catching in his beard as he bellowed. His fists struck the perfect floorboards, the veins on his hands bulging like ropes. "You should have more respect!" Even wounded, even sprawled on the immaculate ground, Trickerium radiated fury enough to fill the room. His blood pooled on the spotless boards, the only blemish in a house too clean, too perfect—and somehow that imperfection only made him seem more dangerous.

Rabbit blinked down at the old man sprawled on the immaculate floor, his instincts at war with the absurdity of the scene. He had expected a trickster, a threat, not a fragile relic glaring up at them like an insulted noble. He bent slightly, extending a steady hand. "I'm here to help you up, sir," he offered, his voice calm, measured, as though trying to mend the damage their entrance had caused.

Trickerium recoiled instantly, his gaunt frame snapping back with surprising force. His bloodshot eyes flared, and he spat venom through his cracked lips. "Keep your hands to yourself, you whelp!" His voice, hoarse and ragged, still carried a weight of command, like a whip cracking across the air.

Harry stepped forward, guilt already gnawing at him. The polished floors, the cloying perfume of roses, the sight of this frail man clutching his side—it unsettled him. Whatever else the Crows had expected, it hadn't been this. "Come on, let me help," Harry said softly, his own hand reaching out almost on instinct. He could feel it—the man was weak, no real danger. For the first time since stepping inside, Harry's anger eased. Trickerium's gaze shifted to him then, something shifting behind his pale, furious eyes: disdain, yes, but laced with curiosity. "Boy," he rasped, his thin voice heavy with intent, "help me up, will you?"

Harry hesitated, his stomach tightening with unease, but he forced himself to kneel and take the old man's hand. The instant their skin touched, the air cracked like lightning splitting the sky. A plume of smoke erupted, thick and acrid, choking the sweetness of roses from the air. The force blinded them, and before Rabbit or Jack could react, the smoke cleared—and both Harry and Trickerium were gone.

"Damn it!" Constant's shout came from just outside, sharp and cutting through the stunned silence. He stormed into the room, his eyes snapping to Jack and Rabbit, who stood frozen in the entryway. His expression hardened, urgency darkening his features. "He's teleported him! We need to find Harry quickly, or he'll be in grave danger." The words hit like a hammer, yanking the group out of their shock. Panic surged; Rabbit swore under his breath, Jack's jaw tightened, and Harleena stepped into the doorway, her cane corso growling low.

“What do we do?” Jack demanded, scanning the eerily pristine room, his voice clipped with barely restrained anger.

“We search the house,” Constant snapped back. His voice carried none of his usual sardonic tone—only steel. “We must find out where they’ve gone before it’s too late.” He drew a long, steady breath, shoulders squaring as he crossed fully into the house. But the moment his boots touched the polished floor, his breath caught. His features tightened. “The house,” he muttered, turning to Harleena, who lingered on the threshold, “it saps our power.” His tone dropped, each word sharp with urgency. “This will have to be a fight of intelligence today. We need to be clever. No powers can be used inside here. I assume this is one of Trickerium’s defenses. Be prepared—only he may be able to bend the rules.”

Jack’s eyes drifted downward, catching on the spot where the old man had bled just moments before. The fresh crimson streak had been there, clear against the flawless floor. But now… gone. No stain. No smear. Not a trace. The boards gleamed again, perfect, as if the blood had never touched them. His breath hitched, frustration boiling in his chest. “I’m starting to hate magic,” he muttered, the words carrying more weight than he meant, as the roses thickened in the air, the house itself feeling like it was watching them.

Harry didn’t feel himself move so much as the world itself blink, the way a lantern flutters when a gust slips under the door. One heartbeat he was at the polished threshold with the others, the rose-sweet air too clean to be real; the next he was gripping cold iron, his knuckles white around a cage bar slick with condensation. He sucked in a breath that tasted of damp stone and old metal. The light had changed—thin, jaundiced, coming from somewhere behind him where a single oil lamp hissed—and the air pressed close, heavy with dust and the sour ghosts of a hundred tinctures. On the far side of the bars the old man let go of his hand with a papery flick, as if ridding himself of a stain. They were underground. A basement, broad but low, the ceiling veined with beams furred in cobweb, the floor a scatter of grit and chalk, boot scuffs looping like nervous handwriting. Shelves bowed under the weight of jars and stoppered bottles; crates slumped in piles; books towered into leaning columns held together by spider silk and habit. One heap in particular lay under a horse blanket the color of ash, its shape too deliberate to be truly random—rounded at one end, angular at the other—like something that had once been arranged and then forgotten.

Disorientation washed through him in a slow, nauseous wave, and then steadied into understanding. Teleport. Forced. He’d been yanked sideways by a hand that knew exactly where to pull. Harry had a way out—he felt for the cool, coin-sized weight of his portal key at his collar, and the charm answered with a faint inner warmth, like a coal breathing under ash. Not dead, then. Not blocked, not entirely. The cage bars prickled along his skin where he gripped them, and when he peered closer he saw hair-thin sigils etched into the iron, delicate as needlework, the sort of ward meant to confuse spells, not crush them. He could leave if he had to. The knowledge clicked something calm into place in his chest. He let his fingers loosen, took in the room, and watched.

Trickerium moved like a bad dream of a scholar who’d never stopped working—thin legs in striped trousers, slippers whispering over grit, robe swung tight around a ribbed frame. He muttered as he went, hands riffling drawers, lifting papers, prodding through boxes with two fingers, every motion precise and impatient at once. “Thieves… gutterscum… brat thinks me a pantry, come and go—ha!” He tugged a drawer, it stuck, he yanked harder, glass clinked. His mouth worked as he searched, the beard dragging a line of crumbs through the air like a scratch on a record. “Breaking, breaking, always breaking—my portcullises turned to butter, my locks to laughter—no, no, where is it—” He pivoted to a shelf crowded with brown bottles bearing faded

ink: vitriol, spirit of wine, honey of antimony, and there, in a cleaner hand, Truth-tincture. He paused, fingers hovering, then snatched it back with a hiss of satisfaction. “There you are, little truth. We’ll pour you into him and rinse out the lies.”

Harry’s heartbeat clipped faster, but not from fear. The old man’s words were a lantern behind a curtain, throwing just enough shadow to betray the shape. Locks turned to laughter; wards eaten like sugar. A boy who treated the house like a pantry. Not him. Someone else. Someone who wore his size and his sins in the old man’s mind. Harry kept his face carefully blank, breath quiet in his throat. Play along, gather what you can. He eased his grip on the bar and tested the floor under his boots—the faintest hum, the soft buzz of a net stretched through the room. The cage wasn’t just iron; it was attention. Step wrong, and the house would notice. He swallowed dust. Somewhere to his right a slow drip tapped into an unseen pan; somewhere to his left a clock ticked, the second hand clicking like a fingernail against glass.

“Done being clever now, are we?” Trickerium crooned, not looking at Harry so much as orbiting him, bottle in one hand, a small pewter funnel in the other. His eyes had a fever-bright sheen, but his hands were surgeon-steady as he set the bottle and funnel on a dented tray and rummaged in a drawer for a spoon whose end was engraved with a crescent moon. “Always slipping the seam, always finding the slat. Ah, but the slats close when the house listens to me, boy.” He wagged the spoon in the air as if scolding a child. “You thought you’d come again and take and take. Pretty, this one—pretty trick, pretty face, pretty manners. We will see the truth of it at last.” He sniffed, a brittle sound. “We will see who winds you. We will see who taught you where to press. We will see why the key bites my doors.”

Key. Harry felt the word hit like a thrown pebble against bone. He kept his mouth shut, jaw locked against the questions that wanted to spill, and forced his eyes to wander as if he’d found something else to fret at—the blanket pile. Up close, it had a sag to it that spoke of cloth over angles. A trunk, perhaps. Or a frame. The blanket’s edge didn’t quite lie flat; a curl of leather strap peeked from beneath, oiled and well-used. The smell in the room shifted as Trickerium pulled another drawer, a bitter, minty scent cutting through the basement damp, and Harry recognized it in spite of himself: crushed wormwood, the way Constant had steeped it when warding a mirror last winter. The old man wasn’t just flinging tools about—he was assembling. Selecting. Preparing a ritual with a patience born of too many intrusions and not enough answers.

The old man’s shoulders rose and fell as he worked, the robe’s hem frisking the floor. Harry watched the tremors in the hands, the tightness around the eyes when a drawer stuck, the wince when he reached too high and his side pulled. Trickerium’s anger wasn’t the hot sort; it was chalk-dry and layered, like sediment, like years of being nibbled by some clever rat he couldn’t catch. “Little lord of the alleys,” he muttered, almost lovingly, as if the enemy were a pet who’d learned too many tricks. “Little prince of padlocks. Breaker of good hinges. Think I don’t know your footfall by now? Think I don’t hear you in the walls?” He set the spoon down, uncorked the bottle with a pop that smelled sharply of anise and copper, and the cold in Harry’s stomach deepened. The liquid inside was clear, but it bent the lamplight oddly, as if it preferred not to be seen.

He risked a breath. “You’re making a mistake,” he said, careful to keep his voice level, not pleading. “I’m not who you think.” The old man’s head tilted, bird-like, but his eyes didn’t soften. “They all say that,” he replied, almost kindly, and dipped the spoon. A drop clung, trembling, round as a pearl. “You’ll say a great many things in a moment. And this time I will *believe* them.” He approached the cage, the lamplight netting his beard in gold, the scent of roses from upstairs riding faintly on his robe as if the house had kissed him before he descended. Up close, Harry could see the fine cracks in his lips, the chapped knuckles, the careful neatness of someone who had built a world where everything stayed where he put it—until it didn’t.

Harry let his fingers brush the charm at his collar, just enough to feel the answering throb: present, patient, possible. The bars hummed their faint warning at his skin, and he made himself still. Not yet. Not until he'd squeezed a little more truth from this old man without the bottle. "If you're so certain," he said softly, eyes on the spoon, "ask me *one* thing first. Something only he would know." He watched the way Trickerium's mouth pressed thin at that, the way he paused because of course there were a hundred such questions and each of them risked admitting he'd been outplayed for years by a boy with a laugh that turned locks to butter. The spoon trembled—just a hair—above the funnel's mouth. Above, somewhere very far away, the house groaned as if remembering its weight.

Rabbit ghosted back into the foyer from the east corridor at the same moment Jack returned from the west, both men wearing the same tight, frustrated look. The entrance hall remained unnervingly pristine—ache-white wainscoting without a nick, parquet gleaming like still water, not a footprint or mote of dust daring to linger. The smell of roses rode the air in a delicate, relentless ribbon, as if the house were perfumed to hide a corpse that wasn't there. Beyond the threshold, Harleena lingered just outside on the stone step, shoulders squared but chin tipped a fraction too high, a tell that her nerves were fizzing under the skin. "Well?" she asked, trying for dry and landing closer to brittle. Rabbit swept a palm across the spotless banister as though testing for the world's last speck of dirt and came away empty. "No other doors," he said. "No back, no side, no cellar hatch. No staff, no mice, no heartbeat but ours. Just rooms that look like they were cleaned by a god with a grudge."

"Great, just what I needed to hear," Harleena muttered, and the words fogged in the cool hall like a breath in winter. Jack, jaw set, angled toward the open doorway to the garden. "Maybe there's a clue in the brickwork—hidden lintel, service crawl," he said, pacing for the step. He never made it. Two feet from the jamb his shoulder hit nothing and everything at once; air thickened into a pane of pressure that bowed under him and then refused, humming faintly against bone. He rocked back with a curse, pressed both palms forward, and felt only smooth resistance, like pushing on polished ice. "What the—? I can't get out." He shot a look at the threshold, at Harleena framed by morning, at the razor-thin line where light met shadow. The house hummed again, pleased with itself. Rabbit's mouth flattened. "Trapped," he said, the word simple as a verdict. "We're stuck until the old bastard waves us out or we make the house change its mind."

From deeper within, Constant's voice floated through the rose-scent and varnish, carrying a note of triumph. "Oi! Over here!" he called. "There's a secret staircase." The sound came from the library's direction, and Jack and Rabbit exchanged a glance before moving—quick, wary steps that tried not to disturb the impossible cleanliness. Harleena hovered at the threshold another heartbeat, thumb worrying the notch in her rifle stock, then edged one boot across the line of the jamb. The air nipped at her skin as if tasting her; she set her jaw and stepped in, the barrier whispering shut behind her like a held breath.

They found Constant with his coat shrugged off one shoulder, crouched beside an armoire that had slid six inches from the wall without leaving so much as a scuff. "Didn't use a drop of juice," he said, a little smug in spite of the tension. "Draft gave it away. Listen." He pressed his ear to the wallpaper—hand-painted lilies under a sheen you could shave in—and rapped a knuckle along the baseboard. The tone changed—hollow, then hollower—as if the wall exhaled. A hairline seam ran down the paper in a line so fine it was more suggestion than cut; a brass nail-head near the floor wasn't a nail at all but a pin. Constant pinched it, twisted. Something inside unlatched with a click that felt in the teeth more than heard, and a slice of wall swung inward on silent hinges to reveal a throat of stone going down, down, steps worn in the middle

by careful feet and breathing cool cellar air that smelled of lime, old paper, and the faint medicinal snap of camphor.

“There’s a high chance Harry could be down there,” Rabbit said, already angling sideways to take the stairs first, gambler’s instincts measuring light and cover and the angle of a shot that wasn’t coming. He glanced back toward the foyer. “Let’s move.” Jack lifted a hand, checking the corners, the ceiling moldings, the places a self-satisfied house might hide a smile. Then the morning outside cracked like a knuckle. A sound—sharp, dry, like a wire pulled too tight finally snapping—rang from the open door, and all three of them turned.

Harry stood on the step just beyond the threshold, facing inward as if he’d been dropped mid-stride. His hair was raked, his shirt askew; a smell of ozone and singed dust came off him in a thin wave. For a heartbeat he was simply there, eyes blown wide, breath not yet caught up. “Harry?” Harleena said, her relief tripping over caution, and she took a half-step toward him. The house noticed first. An invisible hook sank into the boy from behind—no hand, no rope, just a wrenching tug in the air—and he screamed. The sound went high and raw, scraped along the ribs of the hall, and he pitched forward as if yanked by the spine. Harleena moved on instinct, reaching to brace him, and the force took her too, dragging both bodies across the threshold as if the floor had become a belt pulling inward.

They hit the parquet hard, skidding on that impossible polish; Harry curled around the pain in his middle, hands clawed at nothing, teeth clenched as another wrench shivered through him like the house was trying to settle him into a shape it preferred. Harleena sucked air between her teeth, rolled to her knees, and threw an arm across him to keep him from bolting up into another pull. “Easy,” she said, voice low, steadying because it had to be. “Breathe.” Jack was already there, one hand hovering over Harry’s shoulder without quite touching, as if he didn’t trust the house not to take offense at contact.

The wrenching stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving a fizzing ache in the air like static before a storm. Harry’s breath came ragged, sweat bright on his lip despite the coolness of the hall. He managed a strained, crooked half-smile that fooled nobody. “I… guess the house doesn’t want me to leave,” he ground out, voice husky. “That was… unbelievably painful.” He winced, a tremor running the length of him, and swallowed as if the act itself hurt. The rose-scent seemed stronger for a moment, cloying, as if the house were congratulating itself on retrieving a dropped possession.

Constant’s expression darkened, a flash of real anger breaking through the practiced sarcasm. “Anchored him,” he said, eyes ticking to the lintel, the jamb, the places a clever man could hide a bind. “Smart warding. Cruel.” He got to a knee beside Harry and looked him over quick, brisk, competent—the inventory of someone who’d hauled too many friends out of too many hexes. “You can stand?” Harry nodded once, jaw tight, and let Harleena brace his elbow as he found his feet. He kept one palm low on his belly as if holding in the ache.

Jack stepped back to the line of the open door, set his palm against the invisible pane, and pushed. The barrier murmured, firm as ever. He didn’t bother cursing this time. “Then we stop trying the front,” he said, voice iron. He angled his chin toward the open seam in the library wall where the stairs waited like a held breath. “We find the old man, we end this, and we make the house spit us out.” Rabbit flicked a glance at Harry, at Harleena’s white-knuckled grip on his sleeve, then at the stair’s dark throat. He nodded once. “After you, then,” he said to Constant, dry as a match. “Since you made the invitation.” Constant’s mouth tipped in a humorless sliver of a smile; he patted the wall as if humoring a temperamental host, and started down into the cool, smelling of stone and secrets, the others slipping in behind him while the house’s perfect surfaces watched without blinking.

“What happened to you?” Constant demanded, his voice stripped of its earlier flippancy and lined now with sharp concern. Harry, pale and shaken, dragged in shallow breaths as if each word he spoke carried weight. “I was teleported straight into a cage in a windowless room,” he managed, his chest heaving as he fought to steady himself. His eyes were wide, unfocused, still haunted by what he had seen. “Trickerium kept circling around, looking for something, muttering about how these robberies have to stop today. He said we’d regret ever daring to enter his house!” The words poured out of him in a rush, heavy with disbelief and exhaustion. Jack’s brow furrowed, his jaw tight as the implications sank in. “What did he want with you?”

Harry’s voice faltered, a shudder rippling through him as he forced himself to continue. “He had a massive pile of junk beside my cage. I saw him dig through it until he found a small flask with some kind of liquid inside. He kept calling me ‘boy,’ like I was some thief who’d been stealing from him for weeks.” The memory twisted in his gut, leaving his hands trembling at his sides. Rabbit stepped closer, his expression dark, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Sounds like he’s lost his mind,” he muttered. “What did he want with that liquid?” Harry swallowed hard, shaking his head. “Before he could force me to drink it, I used my portkey to teleport out. But I only appeared for a second outside the house—it was like the house itself wanted me back inside. I felt it drag me in. Saints, it hurt so much—I thought I was going to die before it pulled me through.” His voice cracked on the last words, and for a moment silence gripped them all.

“Great,” Jack growled, his tone low and grim, his eyes flicking to the pristine walls around them. “So not only is he powerful, but the house itself is a trap.” His words carried the weight of inevitability, a grim acknowledgment that their enemy was more than flesh and blood. Constant straightened, his face set with determination, his voice sharpened into steel. “We need to go down there and ambush Trickerium. We’ll get answers, and we’ll find out what’s really going on here.” His gaze burned with urgency, daring any of them to argue. The others looked at one another, unease simmering in their expressions, but no one spoke.

They turned toward the staircase, the yawning mouth of shadow descending into depths unknown. The very air seemed to shift as they drew closer, thickening, pressing down upon them like a weight. The wooden steps groaned with each hesitant touch, creaking out a warning that went unheeded. Their breaths echoed too loudly in their ears, the silence around them so absolute it seemed alive, waiting, holding its breath. Harry’s pulse quickened, his hand tightening on the hilt of his dagger, every instinct screaming that this was wrong, that they had already stepped into the jaws of something ancient and patient.

And then the quiet shattered. From the black maw below, a monstrous form erupted, faster than sight could follow. The staircase buckled beneath its weight as it surged upward, a blur of scale and sinew. In the dim light, the horror revealed itself: a woman’s upper body, gaunt and pale, crowned with a seething nest of serpents whose scales caught the light like wet glass. Their hisses rose in a chorus, shrill and venomous, each pair of glowing amber eyes locking onto prey. From the waist down, her form twisted into a massive serpent’s body, coiling and thrashing, every movement radiating raw, unstoppable strength. Her claws, black and jagged as obsidian, slashed through the air, sharp enough to cut stone.

The Crows barely had time to react. The creature slammed into them with the force of a storm, hurling them like rag dolls. Jack crashed into the cold stone wall, stars bursting across his vision as his breath was ripped from his lungs. Rabbit was flung sideways, smashing through a chair that splintered under his weight, shards scattering across the immaculate floor. Harleena’s pistol leapt from her hand as the beast’s tail lashed through the room, the sound of wood cracking and glass shattering filling the air. Harry staggered back, heart pounding in his throat, the echo of serpentine hisses filling his skull. The trap had sprung, and the house itself seemed to close in around them. They weren’t intruders anymore—they were prey.

The monster lunged again, faster than the eye could follow, its serpentine body snapping across the room with terrifying force. The floor shook beneath its weight, and the hisses of its living crown rose to a deafening pitch. Jack braced himself, but the impact slammed him sideways into a cabinet, shattering it in a rain of polished wood and glass. Splinters tore into his arm, and he staggered to his feet with blood running down his sleeve. Rabbit darted forward, swinging the jagged remains of the chair like a cudgel, the wood cracking against the creature's ribs with a sharp crack. For half a second, it reeled back—but Rabbit doubled over, coughing in agony, as if the blow he struck had echoed inside his own chest.

Harry's pulse thundered in his ears. He fired again, the gunshots deafening in the enclosed space. Sparks flared as the bullets struck the creature's pale skin, driving it back into the wall with a guttural shriek. But the victory soured instantly: pain ripped through Harry's ribs, white-hot, like he had been shot himself. He dropped to one knee, choking on the sensation, sweat dripping down his forehead. "It's mirrored!" he gasped, voice cracking. "Every strike we land—it hits us back!" Harleena cursed under her breath, diving aside as the creature's tail slammed into the floor, leaving a crater where she had stood a heartbeat earlier.

The monster's nails scraped along the pristine stone, sparks flying as it lashed toward them again. Jack forced himself upright, clutching at his bleeding arm. "We can't beat it head-on!" he shouted, desperation bleeding into his voice. The beast coiled its serpentine lower half around the staircase, anchoring itself before hurling its massive body toward them like a whip. Rabbit tried to roll clear, but the tail caught his leg, flinging him into the far wall with a sickening crack. He gasped in pain, clutching his side, the air driven from his lungs.

Harleena darted forward, ignoring the risk. She fired her pistol directly at one of the serpent heads crowning the creature's skull. The bullet struck true, bursting scales and flesh—but the price was immediate. A scream tore from her throat as her own forehead split open, blood trickling down her temple as if the wound were hers. She fell to the floor, dazed, her dog barking furiously beside her, teeth snapping at empty air. Constant dragged her back by the arm, his face pale with realization. "Every wound we give it—it shares with us! Saints preserve us, this thing's a curse made flesh!"

The monster hissed, its eyes gleaming with wicked delight as if feeding off their despair. Jack staggered into the center of the room, chest heaving, his vision blurring from the pain echoing through his body. He glanced at Harry, who was still struggling to get to his feet, and Rabbit, wheezing in agony against the wall. "It's too strong!" he roared, spitting blood. "We'll die in here if we don't move—now!" But even as the words left his mouth, the creature slithered forward again, its claws raised high, ready to finish them off. The Crows had seconds, maybe less, to find a way out.

With determination, Harry pushed the creature back with another blast from his gun despite the pain it caused him, forcing it to retreat momentarily. "Run!" he shouted, sprinting down the staircase into the basement, closely followed by Jack and Rabbit's Foot. They slammed the door shut behind them, sealing the three of them away from the chaos above. The sound of the latch falling into place echoed like a death knell, and for a breathless instant, the three men pressed their backs against the wood, gasping, sweat dripping down their brows. Darkness thickened around them, the air stale and damp, every creak of the house above magnified into thunder in their ears.

Up above, Constant felt the room vibrate as the creature's coils twisted in fury, its serpentine body sweeping debris aside as it advanced. He planted his feet, jaw tight, every nerve screaming at him to run—but he couldn't, not now. "I can't let it escape!" he shouted, voice raw, as he launched himself toward the beast. The claws came fast, arcs of gleaming death in the dim light, and he barely rolled aside in time, his coat ripping open with the strike. He scrambled,

searching for anything, any scrap of steel or wood he could wield, but the room gave him nothing. Empty hands and sheer grit were all he had, and against this nightmare of coils and fangs, it felt like suicide.

The creature reared, its eyes glowing with malice, ready to crush him where he stood. And then—steel flashed in the gloom. Harleena moved like a shadow given purpose, her daggers carving arcs of silver as she sprang from behind, the hissing heads of the serpent-crown snapping too late to stop her. “Hey, bitch!” she snarled, her voice sharp as broken glass. “I’ll show you what real pain feels like.” Her blades struck deep, cutting across scales, splitting flesh, spraying dark ichor that burned as it hit the pristine floor. The monster shrieked, a sound that made the walls tremble, twisting to fling her off, but she held fast, driving her knives again into its back with a savage cry.

Constant froze for a half-second, his cigarette trembling between his lips, astonishment mingling with awe. The beast writhed, slamming itself against the wall, its claws raking deep gouges into the stone, but Harleena refused to yield. Her own blood mixed with the creature’s, wounds mirrored across her body, but her eyes blazed with defiance. With one last, brutal strike, she severed the largest serpent from its crown, and the entire abomination convulsed, shrieking its death cry. Its massive form collapsed with a thunderous crash, coils twitching before finally lying still in the silence it had shattered.

Harleena staggered back, her chest heaving, sweat and blood glistening on her skin. Pain etched across her features, but she straightened, wiping her blades clean with steady hands, her expression hard as stone. Constant’s breath came in ragged bursts, his eyes wide, voice breaking with gratitude. “You just saved my life,” he admitted, relief spilling out of him. She shot him a sharp look, eyes narrowing with both irritation and fire, then winced as the mirrored wounds pulled at her flesh. “Don’t thank me yet. This isn’t done.” She turned her gaze toward the dark staircase the others had vanished down, her voice firm and cold. “We need to find the others before something worse wakes up in this damned house. Where did those cowards go?”

Constant managed a shaky grin, though the humor didn’t reach his eyes. “Secret staircase. They’re below, chasing trouble like always.” He drew a deep breath, flicking his cigarette into the gore without looking back. The hiss as it extinguished echoed the pounding of his heart. “Come on, love. If that thing was only the opening act, then we’ll need every blade and trick we’ve got.” Harleena nodded once, rolling her shoulders through the ache, and together they descended, shadows swallowing them whole.

Together, they raced down the hidden stairs, the air growing thicker with tension as each step carried them deeper into the suffocating dark. The staircase groaned beneath their boots, wood creaking as though protesting their intrusion, and the further they went, the more oppressive the blackness became. Their breaths came in shallow bursts, each one echoing faintly in the cramped passage. Then, cutting through the shadows, a weak lantern’s glow trembled ahead, its light no steadier than a dying heartbeat. The flicker revealed only fragments of the room—crumbling stone, piles of indistinct clutter, and the faint glimmer of dust caught in the air. Harleena narrowed her eyes against the dim haze, spotting the frantic silhouette of Jack tearing through the basement, his movements sharp and desperate as he searched.

“Jack!” Constant’s voice cut through the gloom, rough but urgent, as he rushed forward. His trench coat billowed with the momentum, boots scraping the cold floor as he closed the distance. The flickering light caught on the pale strain in Harry and Rabbit’s faces—both of them sprawled awkwardly against the ground as if thrown by invisible hands. Their ragged breaths and the way their fingers clawed against the stone to rise made Constant’s gut tighten. He dropped beside them, worry carving lines across his tired face. “What happened?” His words were clipped, breathless, his gaze darting between them as though the darkness itself might

pounce. Rabbit, voice ragged but forceful, shouted into the room, his words trembling against the silence. “This is all a misunderstanding! We’re not here to steal anything. None of us have ever been here before!” His tone carried equal parts urgency and plea, reverberating against the stone like a confession to some unseen judge.

From the void beyond the lantern’s glow came a voice, rich with venom and dripping disdain. “I’m no fool!” Trickerium’s words rolled like thunder, the sound disembodied, swelling from every shadow at once. “I almost caught a boy stealing from my house last week, but he got away. And now he’s back with his friends to pilfer my treasures!” The accusation cut deep, the contempt in his tone palpable. His voice alone seemed to stir the dust, as if the house itself recoiled in agreement. Rabbit straightened despite the tremor in his limbs, his eyes narrowing as he spoke with a calmness forced through clenched teeth. “Old man, you’re confused,” he said firmly, his voice steady though his chest still heaved with exhaustion. “Are you stuck in this house? What’s going on with you? There’s something evil happening here, and you may not be aware of it. We’re here to help!”

The reply was a sound between a laugh and a growl, a deep, mocking reverberation that crawled beneath their skin. “Help? I need no help!” Trickerium spat, the sneer audible in his voice even from the shadows. “I know exactly what’s going on here.” And then, without warning, the basement flared with violent light. A cinder bloom roared out of the black, its flames spiraling toward them with searing heat. Harleena barely had time to gasp before it slammed into her chest, hurling her sideways like a rag doll. She hit the ground with a cry, her body convulsing in shock as smoke curled from her scorched coat. “Harleena!” Jack’s shout cracked with panic as he skidded across the floor to reach her, his hands already fumbling to steady her shoulders. His face twisted with desperation, but in that split-second of distraction, the shadows themselves seemed to shift.

Trickerium, no longer just a voice but a swift blur, darted around her fallen form with startling speed for a man of his age. His cloak whipped through the dim lantern glow as he surged for the staircase, his figure bending and vanishing almost like smoke in motion. “Get back here!” Jack roared, his voice booming against the walls, but his words carried only anger, not power. By the time he lunged forward, it was too late. The old man’s frail frame reached the top of the stairs and with a final glare over his shoulder, he wrenched the heavy door shut. The slam resounded like a thunderclap, and the sharp grind of bolts and locks slid into place, sealing them inside the suffocating dark.

Rabbit’s fists clenched so tight his knuckles paled in the dim light. The reality of their entrapment pressed down like a vice, heavy and merciless. The clean, rose-scented perfection of the upper floors seemed a cruel memory now, traded for the damp chill and heavy rot of this buried tomb. His jaw set, his voice low and hard. “I have no other options,” he muttered, a dangerous weight hanging in his tone. His eyes flicked once toward the others, steady but grim. “Watch my back.” Harry, still coughing from the smoke, dragged himself upright, confusion lacing with fear as he rasped, “What are you going to do?” Rabbit lifted his head, the tension in his posture sharp as a blade. His answer came with finality, carved in iron. “I’m going to summon help.”

Rabbit considered himself a weaver of luck, a gambler in the great game of fate. But luck was never clean, never free, and his had so often been bought with coin he could never truly afford. Tonight, one of his darkest secrets had to bleed into the open. He knew a ritual, a forbidden one, a way to beckon forces from the shadows of creation—forces older than Doskvol’s bricks, older than the sea that battered its shores. They dealt in whispers and bargains, dangerous trades that left scars on the soul. But sometimes, when every door had been barred shut, the only way forward was through the abyss. His lips trembled as he admitted it to himself, and for a fleeting instant, he wondered if he was damning them all.

“Is that wise?” Constant’s gravel-edged voice cut through the thick silence, a single brow arched as he leaned on his knee. His cigarette trembled with the faintest ember still clinging to life, its smoke curling upward like a question mark into the shadows. Rabbit’s jaw tightened, his hand brushing across the damp stone floor as if to ground himself. “No,” he said finally, voice hollow but firm, “but I’m running out of options.” Jack stepped closer, his silhouette sharp in the wavering lantern light, loyalty written in the set of his shoulders. “We’ll help you if things go south,” he said, steady, unflinching. “Just tell us what to do.” The words sank into Rabbit like a weight and a lifeline all at once.

The group gathered, forming a ring on the cold basement floor. The stone leached the warmth from their bodies, the silence between them thick as tar. Rabbit inhaled deeply, his breath uneven, his fingers twitching as if recalling movements once practiced in secret. He began to chant, old words that slid off the tongue like oil, syllables that bent the air around them. The lantern flickered violently, shadows ballooning across the walls, their shapes twisting into grotesque mockeries. He could feel the tug of it already, the invisible hook of something vast pulling at his spirit. Memories clawed their way into his mind—his first bargain, the day Samaias had answered. He remembered the thrill, the rush of unnatural strength, the bitter taste of victory laced with chains unseen. Now, he felt the same binding threads coiling around his chest, tightening. “Samaias, I call upon you!” Rabbit’s voice rang out, loud, urgent, steady despite the thundering of his heart. “I seek your aid!”

The basement fell still. Even the dust seemed to pause in the air, the faint smell of damp stone overpowered by something acrid, something burning at the edge of perception. They waited, their eyes darting from shadow to shadow, every heartbeat stretching into an unbearable eternity. Rabbit felt sweat bead at his brow, his pulse hammering in his throat. And then it came—a laugh. High-pitched, sharp, a sound that seemed to crawl beneath their skin and coil there like worms. The laughter circled them, chasing itself across the walls, until it felt like it was rising from the very marrow of the house. Rabbit’s stomach twisted, every muscle bracing against the unease that threatened to break his composure.

“Ah,” purred a voice, disembodied, playful, cruel. “I see you’re trying to summon my old friend.” The words slithered through the dark, familiar yet strange, intimate yet mocking. Rabbit’s breath caught in his chest, his shoulders stiffening. “Samaias will not come tonight.” The declaration sent a ripple of relief through him—relief that the demon he once knew wasn’t here to collect his due—but frustration too, bitter and sharp. His teeth clenched, words tumbling out before he could weigh them. “Then who are you? Can you help me?”

The shadows quivered, as if amused by his plea. “Yes,” the voice crooned, silk stretched thin over steel. “For a price.” The sound was velvet, seductive, wrapping itself around each of them, though its gaze seemed fixed squarely on Rabbit. “You may call me… the Dark One for tonight.” The syllables dripped like poison, heavy and sweet. Rabbit’s pulse spiked, panic and intrigue warring in his chest. He forced his voice into a hard edge. “What price?”

The laughter swelled, booming now, bouncing from wall to wall until it became indistinguishable from the grinding of the stone itself. It was a sound that made their bones feel hollow. “What is it that you want?” the Dark One teased, as if humoring a child’s desperate question.

Rabbit’s voice cracked with desperation, raw and urgent. “I want a way out of here for me and my friends.” The words echoed, stripped of pride, of secrecy, of anything but naked need.

The laugh that followed was louder, crueler, rolling like thunder across the room, a sound that shook dust from the beams above. “That’s easy, then! You must leave this house… and every ounce of power within it behind.” The words dripped with satisfaction, a predator’s promise dressed as mercy.

Rabbit frowned, a deep furrow cutting across his features as confusion laced with suspicion. “Is that all you want?” he asked, voice taut. And in the silence that followed, the shadows leaned closer, the lantern sputtering as if it too was holding its breath.

“Yes,” the Dark One confirmed, its voice dripping with malevolence, curling in the corners of the basement like smoke that couldn’t be seen but could be tasted at the back of the throat. Its tone slithered over their skin, heavy and oppressive, every syllable pushing down like the weight of the sea. “A way out for you and four of your friends.” The words landed like a hammer in Rabbit’s chest. His mind raced, counting names as if they were beads on a rosary. Jack. Harleena. Harry. Constant. Trickerium. And the woman Constant had risked so much to rescue. Six names. Six lives tangled together in this trap. But the Dark One had only promised five. Anxiety gnawed at his stomach like rats in the walls, sharp and merciless, every thought clawing at the other. Who could he leave behind? Could he leave anyone behind?

Constant’s eyes burned into him, urgent, unflinching. “Take the deal, Rabbit. You can’t afford to be stuck here.” His voice carried the calm of someone who had walked through death enough times to treat it like an acquaintance. Rabbit’s heart hammered, but before he could form a reply, Harleena cut in sharply, her voice breaking through the tension like glass underfoot. “What about the woman?” she asked, her brows drawn tight, her face pale but fierce. The concern in her eyes wasn’t just compassion—it was rage at the thought of someone being written off, left behind to rot in this cursed house.

Constant turned toward her, his jaw tightening, shadows dancing like black rivers across his face as the lantern guttered. “That’s my problem now,” he said, every word clipped, carrying the weight of resignation. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into this incredibly dangerous mission. It’s too late for her, but you need to get out.” His voice softened on those last words, but there was no tremor in them—only the finality of a man who had already chosen to stay behind. Rabbit’s throat tightened, bile rising with the thought of abandoning someone to this place. “But if I leave her behind—” he started, his voice cracking under the strain.

“Rabbit,” Constant snapped, his tone hardening like steel. “You need to take the deal. We can’t risk losing you all. You need to leave with Trickerium, Jack, Harry, and Harleena. That’s the only way out.” The words slammed into the group, leaving them stunned in silence, each one feeling the chill of what he was proposing. Harry’s eyes widened, alarm flashing like lightning across his face. His breath came fast, uneven, disbelief sharp in his voice as he stammered, “Wait! If he takes that deal, it means you’ll be stuck here, Constant! God knows what could happen to you!”

Constant only smiled, wry and bitter, his lips twisting as though mocking his own fate. The flickering lantern light caught the sharp line of his cheekbones, the tired creases around his eyes. He looked like a man at peace with the idea of being swallowed by the abyss. “I have my tricks, Harry,” he said softly, voice carrying an almost mocking warmth. “But right now, Rabbit needs to make a choice. This is about survival.” His eyes, sharp as broken glass, never left Rabbit’s. The weight of that gaze bore into him, demanding an answer.

Rabbit felt the pressure mounting, crushing, like the walls of the basement themselves were closing in. The Dark One’s presence pressed against his skin, against his lungs, a suffocating shroud that pulsed with a cruel anticipation. His heart thundered in his ears as he forced the words out, each one tasting bitter as if he had swallowed ash. “A safe passage for Rabbit and four of his friends,” he repeated, his tongue heavy, his mouth dry. “Jack, Harry, Harleena, and Trickerium.” His voice faltered at the edges, hesitation creeping into the syllables as he named them.

The silence that followed was unbearable. His mind screamed with doubt. What if this is a trap? What if I’m making a deal with the wrong devil? What if Constant is gambling with all their lives,

not just his own? His fists clenched against his knees, every muscle in his body rigid, his chest heaving as though he'd been running for miles. And in that silence, the laughter returned—low at first, then swelling, a dark and triumphant sound that filled the basement like black water rising over their heads. It wasn't just laughter. It was persuasion. It was inevitability. It was the whisper of chains sliding closed around their throats. And Rabbit, with no other path open, could only listen.

"I… I agree," Rabbit finally said, his voice barely above a whisper, the words tasting like poison as they left his lips. "Excellent!" the Dark One exclaimed, its voice a serpentine hiss, dripping with satisfaction as though it had been waiting for this moment all along. The laughter followed, booming and hollow, echoing against the stone walls until it seemed to come from every shadow. Rabbit shuddered as the sound slid cold fingers down his spine, the air itself tightening around him. Suddenly, from the cluttered pile of rubbish in the corner, a violent gust of wind roared forth, scattering old papers and brittle wood, knocking a cracked mirror free from the mound. It clattered to the ground at Rabbit's feet with a sharp ring, the broken glass catching the faint lantern light and scattering it into fragments across the floor. The Dark One's voice surged back into their ears, commanding and irresistible, "Make the old man see the truth of his reality and leave with your friends, and nothing else. Do this, and you can survive the night." The words pressed down on Rabbit, heavy as chains, and his pulse raced as he bent to lift the jagged mirror. Its fractured surface trembled in his grip, distorting his own reflection into something monstrous, something barely human. He felt the noose of the deal closing in, and for the first time in a long while, he wondered if this time he had gambled too far.

Rabbit's words hung in the thick air, still reverberating as though the basement itself was unwilling to let them go. The others exchanged wary glances, the tension humming like the string of a bow stretched to its limit. There was no path backward; the bargain had been struck, and their fate now lay in carrying out its demand. Their next steps were carved in stone—break the illusion, confront Trickerium, and hope to claw their way free from this cursed house that had them by the throat. They each picked up the mirrors, hands shaking, the cracked glass cold and slick against their palms. Harleena's fingers traced the jagged edges of hers, her knuckles white as she held it close to her chest. She looked sideways at Constant, her eyes filled with a dread that no bravado could mask. Her voice dropped to a whisper, sharp with fear, "Constant… are you really sure you want to stay behind?"

Constant turned his head toward her, the cigarette still smoldering at the corner of his lips now forgotten, his face lit unevenly by the lantern's trembling glow. For once, the mask of sardonic calm slipped, and doubt flickered there in his eyes—brief but undeniable. He could feel the house draining him like leeches on flesh, each second pulling more of his magic away, his lifeblood in trickles. He was already weaker than he cared to admit. "I don't have much choice, Harleena," he said, his voice low, roughened by resignation. "The Dark One's deal is binding. I can't leave with you. But… I'll clear the way for the rest of you." His words carried no tremor, but they weighed heavy, final.

Her jaw clenched, a tremor running through her as she shook her head sharply, defiance hardening her expression. "I don't care what you say—I'm not leaving you behind. Not like this." The conviction in her tone was steel, but her voice cracked on the edges, betraying the storm churning in her chest. The bond between them was unspoken, rooted in something the others never fully grasped, and the thought of abandoning him gnawed at her like acid.

"I can't change it," Constant replied, softer now, but with a hard edge forged from years of dancing with demons and surviving by cunning alone. His eyes locked with hers, glinting like shards of glass, weary but unyielding. "And neither can you. I've made my peace." He inhaled deeply, and though his chest felt tight, he exhaled with the certainty of a man who had already

accepted the gallows. Harleena's lips trembled, but she forced a nod, even as her heart rebelled. "We'll be back for you, Constant. I swear it."

They pressed forward into the suffocating dark of the house, the atmosphere so thick it felt like wading through tar. Every step deeper into the basement only heightened the dread, an oppressive pressure that clung to their throats and lungs, choking away rational thought. Harry's composure, always carefully maintained like a scholar at his desk, frayed with every echo of their footsteps. His gaze flicked over every shadow, expecting them to move, to claw at him, his nerves stretched to the breaking point. Then his eyes landed on a corner of the room, where a cluster of ornate coffins sat stacked like forgotten relics. Their polished wood gleamed unnaturally, untouched by dust, as though the house itself had preserved them. A wave of nausea hit him, bile rising in his throat as unease clawed at his insides.

"Rabbit," Harry called, his voice low but taut with tension, trembling against the silence. The sound cracked like a whip in the stifling air. "Take a look at this." Rabbit stepped forward, the cracked mirror trembling in his grasp, his movements careful but stiff, his pulse thrumming in his ears. He peered at the coffins with an almost detached curiosity, masking the gnawing dread that curled inside his stomach. "What is it?" he asked, though he already hated the sight, hated this entire basement more with every passing second. The coffins gleamed at them like waiting mouths, hungry to be opened.

Harry's fingers hovered just above the carved letters, the rough indentations in the polished wood spelling out "Mirrian" and "Bella." His throat tightened, and when he finally spoke, his voice came out low and uneasy, as though the weight of the names themselves pressed against his chest. "These are names, Rabbit. But there's something... off about them. These are more than just names—they're lives." The words seemed to linger in the dank air of the basement, their meaning sinking into the silence like a stone dropped into black water. Rabbit shifted uneasily, the cracked mirror still trembling faintly in his grip. He swallowed hard, a bead of sweat rolling down his temple despite the cold that gnawed at the edges of his skin. His own voice wavered, carrying the fatigue of too many secrets carried for too long. "We're all paying a price here, Harry. You think this old man didn't? Every bargain has its consequences." His tone was bitter, almost resigned, as though he wasn't only talking about Trickerium anymore. Harry's gaze lingered on the coffins, the names burning in his mind, and slowly, terribly, the pieces began to fit together—Mirrian and Bella weren't strangers. They were family. Trickerium's family. He had built this prison of a house around himself, clinging to the illusion that they were still alive, still with him, their presence preserved in wood and shadow. A shiver coursed down Harry's spine as he realized the truth: the house itself was feeding that delusion, holding Trickerium captive in his own grief.

The longer they lingered in that stifling basement, the tighter the house seemed to close its fist around them. Jack, never one for patience, could feel his chest constricting with every passing second. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, his jaw set tight as though he were grinding his own teeth to dust. The walls felt too close, the shadows too thick, the oppressive weight of unseen eyes pressing on him until it scraped raw against his nerves. He hated it—the waiting, the not knowing, the endless tension that threatened to suffocate them. Finally, his breaking point came in a sharp, violent snap of action. With a guttural roar, Jack spun on his heel and stormed toward the stairs, his boots striking hard against the wooden steps. With a single motion he drew back his foot and slammed it into the door, the sound of splintering wood exploding through the house like a gunshot. The crash reverberated through the walls, rattling the very bones of the house, as fragments of wood scattered across the landing. His voice followed, raw and furious, cutting through the air like a blade. "Enough of this!" he shouted, the words filled with both rage and desperation. "This damn house! I've had enough!"

Harleena flinched at the deafening crack, her shoulders snapping up as though she had been struck. The echo still rang in her ears as she turned sharply toward Jack, her eyes wide. “Jack, what the hell are you—” But he was already storming past her, his shoulders rigid, his breathing heavy with the barely leashed chaos inside him. His temper, once ignited, burned too brightly to be contained. Harleena’s heart pounded in her chest as she reached for him, but he was moving too fast, carried forward by his own fury. The sound of his boots against the floorboards was like a war drum, his fury echoing through every step as he pushed deeper into the suffocating heart of the house.

Constant’s voice cut through the air, strained and sharp, like steel scraping against stone. “Watch your step, Jack,” he warned, his words laced with urgency. “We still have to find Trickerium, and if you make too much noise, it might get us all killed.” His tone carried no softness, only the harsh truth of experience, the kind of warning born from years of stepping into places where the line between life and death was as thin as a breath. Jack shot him a glance over his shoulder, his eyes burning with a reckless fire. “I don’t care, Constant. We need answers. Now.” His voice cracked with the weight of fear buried beneath the anger, a desperate defiance against the house that sought to break them piece by piece.

As Jack stormed away, the tension in the air seemed to grow teeth, every shadow on the walls stretching longer, darker, as if the house itself were leaning in closer. Harleena’s gaze lingered on Jack’s retreating figure, her chest tightening with unease. She knew his anger wasn’t just anger—it was fear clawing its way out, raw and unfiltered. Still, his volatility sent shivers down her spine. They were walking a knife’s edge already, and one wrong move could send them tumbling into the abyss. She turned to Constant, her expression softening despite the tremor in her hands. Her voice dropped, a whisper meant for him alone, heavy with the fear she could no longer keep buried. “Do you really think we’re going to make it out of this?”

Constant’s face shifted, the shadows dancing over the sharp lines of his features as he looked at her. His eyes, usually quick with sardonic humor, darkened, carrying the weight of someone who had stared into too many voids and seen what stared back. “I don’t know, Harleena,” he admitted, his voice low, the words striking harder for their honesty. The house groaned faintly around them, like it agreed. He drew in a deep breath, the smell of roses and dust thick in the air, then exhaled with a sigh heavy enough to bow his shoulders. “But sometimes,” he continued, his tone grim yet steady, “there’s nothing left to do but fight through it. And that’s what we’re going to do. Now—if we can finish what we started.” His words hung in the charged silence, a fragile vow against the crushing darkness, one that might break at any moment.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Harry and Rabbit moved cautiously into the main bedroom. The air was unnervingly still, thick with the faint perfume of roses that seemed to cling to every corner, a scent so clean it felt manufactured, as if meant to hide the rot festering elsewhere. The room stood as a stark contrast to the chaos and menace that bled through the rest of the house. Here, everything gleamed with an unnatural perfection. The dark wooden furniture shone as though freshly polished, surfaces reflecting the soft flicker of lamplight. The bed stood in the center of the room, sheets drawn so taut and smooth they gleamed like glass under the dim glow. Even the curtains were immaculate, hanging in perfect folds without a trace of dust, as though frozen in some untouched ideal of time. Harry’s boots sank into a rug so spotless it seemed unwalked upon, and the sheer order of it all made his skin crawl. He could feel it—this was not life, not habit, but obsession. Perfection weaponized.

Harry’s eyes roamed the chamber, trying to reconcile the pristine order before him with the illusions and horrors they had fought through below. His gaze drifted to the bed, and something in him tightened. Two pillows rested side by side, positioned with absolute symmetry. He approached them slowly, each step heavy with dread, his pulse hammering in his ears. The stitching across the cases was neat, deliberate, cruelly precise. Names. His breath caught as

the words registered, stitched in pale thread that seemed to glow faintly in the lamplight: *Vincent* and *Mirrian.* His throat constricted, his voice coming out low and shaken. “Rabbit, look at this,” he whispered, pointing at the pillows with trembling fingers. “Vincent… Mirrian. These names… they’re tied to everything. To Trickerium’s obsession with his past.” His voice faltered, weighed down by the implications, each syllable heavy with unease.

Rabbit stepped closer, his brow furrowing as his eyes fixed on the embroidered letters. He bent slightly, squinting at the names, his expression twisting with unease as if he could feel the weight of the past pressing against the present. His voice was hushed, though sharp with tension. “It’s all connected, isn’t it? The illusion, the deal, the coffins downstairs, the trap we’ve walked into. Mirrian, Bella, Vincent… his ghosts. His family.” He hesitated, lips curling in thought, before shaking his head in frustration. “But who the hell is Vincent?” The uncertainty in his tone cracked against the silence, and for a moment, the immaculate bedroom seemed to close in on them, the shadows stretching long and tight.

Harry’s jaw clenched as he pulled back from the pillows, turning to Rabbit with eyes that had gone dark with understanding. His voice was heavy, laced with grim certainty. “We’re not the only ones trapped here,” he muttered, each word feeling like stone. “All these ghosts—Trickerium included. They’re stuck in a never-ending cycle. He doesn’t see what’s real anymore. He won’t let go.” The thought gnawed at him, the sheer hopelessness of it seeping into his bones. He could feel the illusion pressing against him, whispering its lies, and the knowledge that Trickerium believed it all—believed his family still lived within these walls—made Harry’s stomach churn.

Rabbit’s eyes darkened, his fists curling tight at his sides, knuckles white as his mind raced. His voice came out hard, resolute. “Then we need to get to him. We need to make him see the truth. There’s no way out for him until he does.” The conviction in his words was sharp, but beneath it lay a tremor, the creeping dread that what they faced wasn’t a man anymore, but a broken mind wrapped in a curse that consumed everything it touched.

Before Harry could respond, the atmosphere shifted violently. A sudden flash of light blazed from the corner of the room, so fast he barely had time to register it before the world erupted around him. A roaring cinder bloom shot from the shadows, smashing into them with brutal force. The explosion threw Harry off his feet, his back slamming against the wall with bone-rattling impact. Heat seared through his clothes, biting into his skin, and his lungs struggled against the choking veil of smoke. He gasped out, voice ragged, “Damn it!” blinking away the sting in his eyes. He could taste iron, acrid smoke and ash clogging his throat as his vision swam.

“Trickerium!” he roared, his voice cracking through the haze, the name spat like an accusation. His sharp gaze darted across the room, searching the shadows as his heart hammered in his chest. “He’s here, Rabbit! He’s invisible, but the moment he uses magic, he shows himself!” Rabbit stumbled to his feet, coughing, the acrid smoke burning his lungs. His jaw tightened as his eyes darted through the gloom. His voice rose, fierce and commanding, as he shouted into the oppressive silence of the pristine room. “Trickerium, listen to me! This is all an illusion! You’re living in a trap! A lie!” The words echoed off the immaculate walls, ringing hollow against the stillness, swallowed almost immediately by the heavy quiet that followed. There was no response, no movement—only the weight of the room pressing down, suffocating in its silence, leaving them bracing for the next strike.

Then, from outside the door, the sound of heavy, deliberate footsteps drew nearer, each one echoing like a drumbeat through the suffocating silence. The tension in the air seemed to knot tighter with every step until Jack, Constant, and Harleena emerged into the hallway, their faces grim, eyes sharp with the weight of the danger pressing down on them. Jack’s hand gripped the

hilt of his weapon so tightly that his knuckles whitened, while Harleena's daggers gleamed faintly in the lantern light, her jaw set, her breath measured but tense. Constant's expression was darker still, his shoulders taut, the look in his eyes betraying the gnawing strain of a man who knew he was running out of time. "We've got him trapped in here, but we can't see him," he muttered, his voice low but laced with tension, the words heavy as iron.

"Old man!" Jack bellowed suddenly, his voice breaking the silence like a hammer striking glass. He stepped toward the door, his usual cocky bravado cracking through the stillness, desperate to anchor himself against the unseen dread swirling in the room. "We know you're in here! You can't hide from us! Look into the damn mirror!" With a sharp, decisive motion, Jack raised the mirror high, angling it so its faint, spectral sheen caught the dim light and cast a cold gleam into the shadows. For a heartbeat, the silence stretched, and then Trickerium's voice roared from the darkness, booming and venomous, each syllable like a curse spat into the air. "Filthy thieves!" he thundered. "You dare invade my home, my sanctuary? You will regret this! You will all die here!" The sheer force of his fury made the air tremble, and the malice behind it was thick enough to taste, a bitter tang that clung to their throats.

Harry stepped forward despite the chill that slithered down his spine, shoving his fear down as though willing it to die under his resolve. His voice cracked with desperation but rang loud enough to cut through the storm. "Trickerium! Look at the mirror!" he shouted, forcing the words out. "It's time you saw the truth!" The demand seemed to hang in the air, daring the shadows to answer. Constant, eyes narrowed, drifted closer to the bed, his attention caught on the pillows with their chillingly perfect stitching. His voice was calm but edged with urgency, a surgeon's blade cutting through lies. "Mirrian... Bella... who are they?" he asked, each name pronounced with deliberate weight. "Are they dead?"

For a long, dreadful moment, the room went still, so still that even the sound of their own breathing seemed too loud. Then Trickerium's voice tore through it, hoarse and trembling with a rage that bordered on madness. "Keep their names out of your mouth!" he roared, his voice cracking into a snarl. "They were mine! They are mine! You know nothing of this!" The words dripped with grief and possession, the denial so sharp it felt like a blade slicing through the room. Constant's gaze hardened, his voice steady but carrying a steel edge. "You tried to bring them back, didn't you? That's what all of this is. The magic, the illusions, the ghosts… you've been chasing an impossible dream."

Trickerium's response was instantaneous, a shriek that rattled the walls, raw with fury and anguish. "NO!" he bellowed, the sound reverberating through the very bones of the house. "This… this wasn't part of the deal!" The air itself seemed to explode as a violent burst of energy erupted from nowhere, slamming into Constant with brutal force. He was hurled backward, his body smashing against the wall with a sickening thud. The impact knocked the breath from his lungs, his head snapping back, vision blurring as he slumped to the floor. "NO! Do not speak their names!" Trickerium's voice screamed again, his fury wild and untamed. And then, as quickly as the attack had come, he vanished into the air, leaving behind only the fading echo of his rage.

"Constant!" Harleena cried, rushing to his side, her face tight with fear as she dropped to her knees beside him. Her hands hovered over him, checking for breath, for blood, for anything that might spell the worst. Rabbit's resolve hardened, the desperation in him turning to fire. He yanked the mirror out with a fierce motion, holding it up high so the light refracted and lanced into the darkness. His voice thundered with all the force he could muster. "Look! See the truth! The truth of your illusion!"

For a moment, there was only silence—an awful, choking silence. Then came the sound of frantic, broken gasps, echoing from nowhere and everywhere at once. "No... no, it's not

possible!" Trickerium's voice muttered, trembling and unravelling with fear. "It's not possible…" he repeated, the mantra growing weaker, more desperate, each word dripping despair. Then, with a shimmer of warped light, his form broke through the shadows and reappeared. His frail hands clawed at the mirror, his long fingers trembling as they gripped its edges. His face, twisted in horror, reflected in the glass—a lined, weary mask of age and madness, his eyes wide and uncomprehending. "You…" he gasped, staring at his own reflection as if it were a stranger. His lips quivered, his breath rattling in his chest. "This isn't… this wasn't our deal!" His voice cracked, and for the first time, the mighty old man looked small, broken, and vulnerable.

But before anyone could move, Trickerium let out a raw, guttural scream of rage that shook the air, his frail body suddenly animated with wild, unnatural strength. With a single violent gesture, a wave of invisible force slammed into Jack, hurling him across the room like a rag doll. He hit the ground hard, the air knocked from his lungs as pain shot through his ribs. Trickerium's hands clutched the mirror as though it were the only anchor left in a collapsing world, his eyes wide and bloodshot, madness etched deep into every line of his face. With a feral desperation, he bolted for the doorway, his robes whipping around him as he vanished back into the thick, unnatural shadows of the house, his form dissolving into the very gloom itself. In his wake, the darkness shivered—and then it took shape. A massive bear, its form coalescing from thin air, fur bristling and matted with shadow, stepped forward with a bone-shaking roar. Its yellowed fangs gleamed in the dim light, saliva dripping in heavy strands, and its claws scraped across the immaculate wooden floor with a sound that made every nerve bristle. The beast's growl reverberated through the walls, the sound primal and hungry, a promise of carnage.

"Oh no, not again!" Rabbit cursed, his voice sharp with panic as his eyes widened in horror. The memory of their last brush with summoned creatures clawed back at him, each nightmare thought rushing to the surface. The bear's eyes glowed faintly, unnatural, burning with the rage of the man who had conjured it. "RUN!" Harry shouted, his voice breaking through the paralysis gripping the group. He seized Rabbit's arm, yanking him toward the door with desperate urgency. "He summoned that bear! We can't fight it! Let's get out of here!" The beast lunged forward, its bulk crashing into the space where they had stood only a heartbeat before, its claws slicing the air close enough to make the hair on Harry's neck rise.

With no time to waste, they stumbled and sprinted across the pristine floor, every footfall echoing like a drumbeat of survival. The roar of the bear followed them, shaking the very air around them as if the house itself were groaning under the weight of its fury. Harry slammed into the door with his shoulder, forcing it open, and they tumbled into the hall. Without hesitation, he shoved it back closed with all his weight and twisted the lock into place. The wood shuddered instantly under the monster's assault, each pounding blow rattling the hinges. The sound of claws tearing into the other side was deafening. For a fleeting second, they had bought themselves space, but it would not last.

Harleena whirled around, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths. Sweat clung to her brow, but her eyes were sharp, furious. She looked back at the quivering door, the wood already splintering. "That won't hold for long," she said, her voice low, clipped with urgency. Her tone betrayed no illusions, only the raw calculation of someone who had seen enough death to know what was coming. "We need to move now." The air in the hall was thick with smoke and sweat, the tension coiling around them tighter with each breath.

"Jack's already gone after him," Constant snapped, glancing down the corridor where the shadows seemed to twist and stretch with Trickerium's fleeing presence. His face was grim, his coat torn at the shoulder from the earlier blast. His words were edged with equal parts anger and respect for the foolhardy bravery of their comrade. "Let's just hope he can keep up with Trickerium." His voice carried the unspoken truth: Jack might already be running headlong into a trap.

The group surged forward, their movements swift and ragged, a desperate hunt now driving them. The echoes of the bear's furious roars still thundered behind them, every blow against the locked door another reminder that they had only moments before being torn to shreds. Their boots pounded against the floorboards, their shadows stretching long under the faint glow of lanterns as they pushed deeper into the house. The illusionary perfection of the walls around them—polished, spotless, too pristine—only heightened the sense that none of it was real, that they were racing through the hollow bones of a lie.

Downstairs, beneath the immaculate layers of illusion, Trickerium was already spiraling into his reckoning. His voice carried upward, raw and cracked, words bouncing off the walls with the desperation of a man cornered by truth. "No! You promised me! A life with my family! Immortality! You promised!" His tone broke between fury and grief, his fists trembling as he clenched them so hard his knuckles bled. The air warped with his rage, ripples of magic bleeding from every syllable. His voice echoed like a prayer turned into a curse. "I've killed for you! Twenty-seven souls! All for this!"

From the shadows, the Dark One's voice slithered forth, cold and unbothered, every word sinking like oil into their bones. "You wanted life, Trickerium. A life with your family. I gave you immortality. It was all real… for you." The words carried no malice, only the merciless certainty of a contract fulfilled. Trickerium's face twisted as though struck, disbelief cutting into him like a blade. His gaze darted frantically around the hall, taking in the gleaming perfection, the impossible cleanliness, the flowers that never wilted. His heart pounded as the truth clawed its way in. "This… this isn't real!" he screamed, stumbling back, spittle flying from his lips. "It's all an illusion! My wife, my daughter... they're not real! None of this is real!"

The Dark One's voice remained steady, final, merciless as a gravestone. "You wanted this. You wanted to live forever with them. I gave you that. But you never asked for the truth. This is the life you asked for."

Trickerium's hands shook violently as he clawed at the air, his breathing ragged, his body quaking between rage and despair. "I've been living in a lie... All of it!" he cried, his voice breaking as tears welled in his sunken eyes. "The house… my family… everything I thought I had is gone. It was all fake!" His voice faltered, and the sound of his anguish filled the halls like a lament.

At the entrance, the group—Jack, Harry, Rabbit, Constant, and Harleena—stood frozen, the truth crashing over them like icy water. Their breaths came shallow, their bodies tense, each of them knowing instinctively that what they were witnessing was more than madness—it was the revelation of a prison made of sorrow and deceit. The house itself seemed to groan under the weight of the lie unraveling, the air vibrating as Trickerium's reality crumbled around them. In that moment, every one of them felt it: Trickerium had not been the master of his sanctuary at all. He had been its prisoner.

"Twenty-seven lives..." Rabbit muttered under his breath, the words tasting bitter as they left his tongue, his face pale in the lantern light. "He really thought he was getting it all back." The truth of it cut through him like a blade, heavy and undeniable. Constant's gaze hardened, his jaw set tight, eyes burning as they locked onto Trickerium. The old man had collapsed to his knees, his frail body shaking, eyes wild with grief and fury, overwhelmed by the enormity of his mistake. "We need to stop him before he destroys himself completely," Constant said, his voice taut with urgency, though even he knew there might be nothing left to save.

But Trickerium's fury surged again, rising like a wave about to break. His cracked lips curled into a snarl as he lifted his face toward the oppressive darkness, spittle flying with every word. "I gave you everything!" he screamed, his voice raw with desperation, echoing through the

crumbling chamber. “And this... this is the price? For nothing? Nothing but lies?” His voice broke on the last word, the sound closer to a sob than a curse. From the shadows, the Dark One’s response came smooth, cold, and merciless, as though it took pleasure in twisting the knife. “You wanted perfection, Trickerium. I gave it to you. You wanted your family back. But the price was always the truth. You were never meant to have it all.” The voice slithered through the ruins, coiling around the old man’s heart until it squeezed.

The air thickened, the tension palpable as Trickerium’s gaunt body shook with the force of his realisation. His eyes darted wildly around him, seeing now the house for what it was—its gleaming walls and pristine corners flickering, peeling away like old paint to reveal rot beneath. His rage faltered, giving way to something far heavier. His lips trembled, and his words slipped out as though pulled from the very marrow of his bones. “I’ve wasted five years...” he whispered, the fire in his voice extinguished, replaced by a hollow despair that left the room colder. “This isn’t what I bargained for.”

Then, with a sudden surge of energy, he snapped his head toward the mirror, his eyes blazing with a last, desperate defiance. His fingers clawed at the glass as he screamed, “I’m done with this! I’m breaking the contract! ( )!” The words were jagged, ancient, and heavy, and when they erupted from his throat, the very foundation of the house trembled. The walls groaned as if they were alive, the pristine surfaces buckling and cracking, the air filled with a deafening roar of collapsing illusions. The perfect furniture blackened and rotted in an instant, sheets fraying to dust, polished wood warping into splintered ruin. The carefully tended roses in the air shriveled into black ash. His vision of family—the soft voices, the phantom presence—dissolved into nothing, evaporating into silence.

Trickerium fell forward onto his hands, the mirror slipping from his grasp and clattering against the stone. His body twisted with unnatural speed, the years catching up to him all at once. His muscles shrank, his shoulders caved inward, his skin sagged like melted wax, liver-spotted and paper-thin, his hair falling out in tufts that scattered to the ruined floor. His back arched, bones groaning, until at last he collapsed fully, wheezing, a frail, malnourished husk of the man who had once bargained for eternity.

Around him, the house continued to die, its perfection collapsing into dust and shadow, leaving behind only a hollow carcass of stone and timber. Amid the chaos, his whisper broke the silence, so faint it was almost lost in the groaning ruins. “I deserve this...” His words carried no fight, no pride, only the acceptance of a man who had finally seen himself without illusions.

The Dark One’s laughter erupted through the decay, rich and venomous, a sound that clung to their skin like oil. It slithered in every corner, filling every ear, leaving no space untouched. “You wanted the truth, Trickerium. Well, here it is. Everything you held dear—everything you thought was yours—is nothing. You were never meant to have it. You were never meant to live forever. Now you see the price of trying to cheat the natural order.”

The Crows stood together at the edge of the chamber, their faces caught between horror and grim understanding. Dust rained from the ceiling, the floor quaking beneath their boots, the stench of decay stinging their nostrils. Their gazes turned to the broken man in the dirt, his sobs barely audible. The reality of what they had witnessed pressed heavily on their chests. They had been inside his dream, part of his prison, part of the lie he had clung to. The air itself carried the weight of that truth, pressing down like iron chains.

Harry’s voice was quiet, almost reverent as he broke the silence, his chest rising and falling unevenly. “We’ve all been stuck in his fantasy... caught in the same illusion.” His words hung like smoke, heavy and inescapable. Rabbit nodded slowly, his gaze as dark as the room itself, the

flickering remnants of the mirror’s glow reflected in his eyes. “But this—this is the price of trying to bring the dead back. It was never meant to be.”

For a long, unbearable moment, they stood in silence as the world of illusions turned to ruin around them, every breath thick with dust and despair, every heartbeat a reminder of how close they had all come to being swallowed by the same lie.

As the house continued to fall into silence, Harry turned to Rabbit, his voice full of confusion and lingering dread. "Rabbit, did you understand the word Trickerium shouted to break the contract? What did it mean?" His voice cracked slightly, the weight of the moment still pressing on his chest. Rabbit, his focus still on the frail form of Trickerium, shook his head slowly, the candlelight flickering across his tired face. "I don’t know exactly what it means. But I think it’s the real name of the Dark One. Some demonic contracts can be broken by simply fulfilling one condition, one word. It’s something that needs to be studied more carefully." His tone was heavy, but also laced with an unease that he couldn’t disguise, as though just speaking of it risked drawing its attention again. The group gathered closer around Trickerium, who lay breathing heavily, his chest rattling with each shallow gasp, his body visibly withering in front of their eyes. Jack knelt beside him, his usual sharp edge dulled by the sight of a man unraveling before them. His eyes scanned Trickerium’s sunken frame, the papery skin clinging desperately to brittle bones. "He’s still alive, barely. But he looks like he’s running out of time." His voice carried both pity and grim recognition.

Rabbit crouched down, speaking softly to Trickerium, his voice gentler than it had been in years. "Do I have permission to move you to our hospital in Crow's Foot? We’ll try to help you, but I can’t promise much." The old man’s lips trembled, his eyes fluttering open just enough to meet Rabbit’s gaze. There was the faintest glimmer of recognition in them—like a man finally seeing through years of fog. With a weak nod, Trickerium gave his answer. Rabbit’s voice softened further, lowering into a whisper meant only for him. "I promise, if you don’t make it, we’ll make sure it's painless." Trickerium exhaled, a faint rattle in his throat, but his eyes held something close to relief.

Constant stood back, apart from the group, his arms crossed loosely as though holding himself together, his expression distant and hollow. His eyes—once sharp and sly—were now dull, filled with a weary acceptance that made Harleena’s chest tighten. “No one should tamper with the natural order of things. The dead stay dead,” he said, his voice carrying the weight of a man who had stared too long into the abyss. The words fell heavy in the room, cutting through the dust and ruin. Harleena’s eyes snapped to him, her stomach dropping as she saw what her heart had already sensed. "Constant..." Her voice wavered with panic, her throat tight. "You're... you're transparent! What’s happening to you?"

Constant looked down at his own body, his hands flickering faintly with a pale glow. His legs seemed thinner, almost see-through, as if reality itself was pushing him out. He gave a hollow laugh, the sound dry and cracked. "Yeah, well… that's about right." He turned to face them all, the corner of his lips twitching upward into a faint, ghostly smirk. His smile was a ghost of what it once was, more memory than expression. "There’s nothing you can do to save me. I’m getting what I deserve. This is the price I’ve paid. But I’m at peace with it now. Goodbye, everyone." His voice was soft, but steady, and it left no room for hope. His gaze moved to Jack last, his eyes warming with something rare, almost paternal. "Jack," he said, his voice carrying a faint echo, "The old man—Trickerium—he’s got a stash hidden around here somewhere. A cash. Consider it payment for your help. You earned it." Jack’s lips curved into a subtle, bittersweet smile, and he nodded once. "I’ll find it. Don’t worry."

Rabbit stepped forward, his heart pounding, his hand trembling as he reached out, desperate to hold onto him, to tether him to their world. But as his fingers extended, they passed straight

through Constant's arm, touching nothing but cold air. He froze, his hand hovering uselessly in the empty space where Constant had been. Constant exhaled, the motion sending a faint puff of smoke curling out of his mouth, though no cigarette sat between his lips. "I wish I could have a smoke…" he murmured, his voice soft and tinged with longing. And then, with cruel irony, the Dark One materialised beside him, tall and looming, its presence suffocating. With a flick of its hand, it conjured a cigarette already burning, and lit it for him with casual precision. Constant's lips twitched into a faint smile. He took it between his fingers, his hands shaking slightly, and raised it to his mouth. He inhaled deeply, his chest hollow but still capable of drawing in the smoke. When he exhaled, the air was thick with it, and he laughed quietly, the sound both weary and defiant. "Let go already, you wanker," he muttered to the Dark One, his voice still carrying the sting of his old sharpness.

The Dark One gave the faintest echo of a smile, its eyes unreadable, cold as void. "You and your four friends can go. Leave the house for me. Don't come back." Its voice reverberated in the walls, leaving no doubt it was a command, not a suggestion. Rabbit nodded solemnly, his throat dry, turning toward Trickerium. "As agreed." He shifted his grip carefully, cradling the weakened old man in his arms as though he might crumble to dust if held too tightly. His gaze hardened with resolve as he turned toward the door, every step weighted with the gravity of the promise he had made.

Harleena lingered, her boots rooted to the ground, her eyes refusing to leave Constant's fading figure. Her heart throbbed painfully in her chest, every beat whispering that she couldn't let him go, not like this. She stepped closer, her voice breaking though she tried to keep it strong. "Is there any way we can contact you again? Or maybe… save you?" Her tone was desperate, clinging to a hope she knew was already gone. Constant's laugh was bitter, dry as ash, and it echoed through the ruins like a cruel joke. "Save me? Hardly, my dear," he said, his tone sardonic but softened with something almost kind. "But Mistress Vehl might be able to help you with the long-distance call." Harleena blinked, confusion mingling with disbelief at his cryptic remark, but before she could ask more, he gave her one last smile. The light in his eyes flickered faintly, then dimmed, fading as the rest of him dissolved into the air.

As the last remnants of Constant's presence slipped into nothing, Harleena finally tore her gaze away, her heart raw. She turned to the Dark One, still looming in the shadows like a vulture. Its cold eyes glanced over her for the briefest of moments, and then dismissed her entirely, shifting its focus back to Rabbit and the others. "You're free to leave, as we agreed. Leave this house for me. Don't return." Rabbit tightened his hold on Trickerium, his voice quiet but laced with steel. "We'll go. And we won't come back." Harleena hesitated, her lips trembling as she looked back at the empty space where Constant had stood. Her heart cracked under the weight of it, and her voice broke into a whisper. "Goodbye…"

And with that, the group stepped out of the ruin of Trickerium's illusions, carrying the frail old man with them, leaving Constant—and the ghosts of the past—behind. The Dark One's chilling laughter followed them one last time, echoing through the decayed bones of the house as they crossed its threshold, a reminder that though they had survived, something dangerous and hungry had been left behind in the shadows.

Chapter 7: **Where the Children Play**

The morning light crept slowly across the cobblestones of Crow's Ward, chasing away the night's shadows with pale fingers of dawn. It touched the outer walls of the Crows' house, a place that, not so long ago, had been nothing more than a derelict husk—abandoned, forgotten, just another ruin in a city full of them. But now it stood different, quietly transformed. From the outside, it appeared modest yet presentable, its windows patched, its walls scrubbed of graffiti and soot, its door no longer sagging on its hinges. Curtains hung in the windows, faint silhouettes moved behind the glass, and for anyone passing by, it looked like any other home where a family might eat breakfast together, or where tradesmen might return after a long day. No one could guess that beneath its floors and foundation stretched a hidden life: the underground medical center, stitched together with scavenged tools and salvaged supplies, where broken bodies were mended in secret. It smelled of alcohol and old blood, of smoke and incense burned to cover the scent, and within its quiet walls countless whispers of pain and recovery lingered. To outsiders, the house was simply lived in. To those who knew the truth, it was sanctuary, and it was deception all at once.

Harry sat near one of the upstairs windows, his chair pulled close enough for the weak sunlight to brush across his face. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, glasses dangling from one hand as if he had forgotten he was holding them. His eyes carried the exhaustion of sleepless hours, haunted by the illusions of the night before—the immaculate perfection of Trickerium's house, Constant's ghostly fading smile, the way the Dark One's presence seemed to gnaw at the very marrow of his bones. Harry had always tried to be the steady one, the voice of logic, but now even his logic was fraying at the edges. He could not reason away the tremor in his hands or the way his thoughts looped back to Constant's laugh, dry and bitter, as he vanished. A man can accept death, Harry thought, but to be swallowed into nothing… that was a fate worse than death itself. He rubbed his temples, muttering calculations and possibilities under his breath, as if repeating them might restore order. But no formula, no clever arrangement of numbers, could undo what had been lost.

Down the hall, Harleena sat cross-legged on her bed, her eyes red from a night of little sleep. Her costume and tools lay scattered across the floor in messy disarray, her mask tossed onto the dresser, staring at her with a lifeless grin. She turned the silver locket in her hands over and over, the metal catching faint glimmers of the light as if mocking her restless state. Constant's last words pressed heavily on her, his fading humor, the smoke curling from lips that no longer belonged to flesh. She had wanted to believe there was something she could do—that her stubborn refusal to leave him behind might mean something—but in the end, she had only watched. Powerless. She whispered his name once, quietly, like a secret, and clenched the locket until it bit into her palm. In her heart, a mixture of grief and rage coiled tightly. She had seen many people die in Doskvol, but Constant was different. He had faced darkness so long that it had become part of him, and still, some part of her had believed he would endure, that his sharp tongue would find a way to cut through even death. But now she knew better. She wiped her eyes quickly, refusing to let the tears linger. If she couldn't save Constant, then she would damn well save the others. That was the promise she made silently to herself, and she would not let the city take them, too.

In the kitchen, Rabbit leaned against the counter, a cup of bitter black coffee steaming faintly in his hand. His reflection stared back at him in the liquid, distorted and wavering. He had been quiet since the night before, but his silence was not calm—it was heavy, sharpened by guilt and calculations of what came next. He had lifted Trickerium from that collapsing illusion with his own arms, felt the frailty of the man's bones through his coat, and in that weight he had felt something familiar: the inevitable consequence of bargains made in desperation. Rabbit had

always prided himself on being the planner, the one who could read the game three moves ahead, but Trickerium had reminded him that some games could never be won, only endured. The Dark One's laughter still echoed in his head, curling like smoke around his thoughts. He sipped his coffee, the taste acrid on his tongue, and muttered to himself that they would never again be caught unprepared. Magic had power, and they had seen it tear men apart. If they were to survive what lay ahead—Merrow, the Gloam Sisters, the Circle—they would need that power themselves. He looked toward the window, toward the light creeping into the city, and vowed that no matter how ugly the means, he would not let them fall into the same trap as Trickerium.

Jack, unlike the others, was not awake in the quiet, but sprawled across his bed in a mess of tangled sheets, one arm flung over his head, the other lazily clutching a bottle that was nearly empty. Yet even in sleep, his face twitched with restlessness, his brow furrowed as if his dreams were not gentle. He had smiled last night, laughed even, as he spoke of Constant's stash and the promise of coin. But beneath that mask, the loss had left its mark. Jack had lived his life balancing between charm and chaos, between survival and indulgence, and Constant had been one of the few who could see through his tricks, one of the few who spoke to him with something almost fatherly. In his dreams, he heard Constant's voice still, teasing and scolding in the same breath, and when he woke, he would feel the silence where it should have been. A silence that no bottle of liquor or stolen magic trinket could fill. The morning light finally reached his face, warming his skin, and his eyes blinked open slowly, unfocused at first. He sat up groggily, rubbing at his eyes, and for a moment the world was quiet. Then he sighed, smirk tugging faintly at the corner of his lips, and muttered, "Well, here we are again." For Jack, grief would never stop him from moving forward. He would carry it, mock it, twist it into something useful, because in Doskvol, the only alternative was to let it eat you alive.

The house stirred with the quiet weight of loss and the stubborn determination to endure. Each of them carried Constant's absence differently, but together, beneath the roof of their reclaimed home, the Crows remained bound. From the outside, their house looked ordinary. From the inside, it breathed with grief, resilience, and the fragile beginnings of their next fight.

Jack stayed behind in his room longer than usual, his body still aching from the night before, his mind heavier than the hangover settling in his skull. The curtains swayed with the draft, letting the pale morning light spill across the clutter on his desk—bottles of liquor, half-burned candles, a scattered deck of cards, and now, tucked carefully apart from the chaos, the spoils of Trickerium's crumbling house. Three glass vials, stoppered and sealed, the liquid inside swirling faintly with a strange inner glow like smoke trapped in water. Bottled spells—arcane power caged, waiting for the right hand to uncork them. Next to them lay a trinket, a gilded brooch shaped like a raven's wing, its surface etched with runes so small he hadn't yet puzzled out their meaning. Worth something, maybe more to a collector than to him, but it was coin nonetheless. He ran his fingers over the bottles, smirking faintly at the idea of magic as if it were just another tool to stash in his sleeve, another trick in his pocket. But then his grin faltered as his thoughts circled back to the war ahead, to the flames that had torn through the orphanage, to Emberlash and his lunatics, men who had set fire to children without hesitation. Jack leaned back in his chair, lips pressed thin. Trinkets and coin meant little if they didn't deal with the Ember Circle. There was no escaping the war now.

Through the thin walls of the house, he heard them—the shuffle of feet, mugs clinking against the worn wooden table, the low murmur of Rabbit's voice mixing with the sharper tones of Harry and Harleena. The smell of bitter coffee carried down the hallway, warm and familiar, a small comfort after a night that had left all of them raw. Jack pushed himself up, rolling his shoulders as if shaking off the weight of the past hours, and made his way toward the kitchen.

When he stepped in, the others were already gathered around the battered table, mugs in hand. Rabbit leaned forward, one hand wrapped around his cup, his tone measured but with the spark of pride hiding in his eyes. “It’s official,” Rabbit was saying. “The hotel Tobias was meant to set up? It’s open now. Quietly, of course. No grand announcement. Just a door unlocked, lamps burning inside, staff moving in like it had always been there. They’re calling it Vida Nova.”

Harry tilted his head, stirring his coffee absently. “Vida Nova. New Life.” He frowned slightly. “You think it’s really a good idea, putting Tobias in charge of something like that? We’re putting a lot in his hands.”

Rabbit gave a half-smile, shrugging as if he’d already weighed the risk. “That’s the point. It’s mostly his to run. A legal front, something clean, something the Crows can point to without attracting the wrong kind of heat. It was my idea, remember? It’s a foothold, a way of digging roots into another part of the city.”

Harleena’s lips pressed into a tight line, her eyes narrowing as she leaned back in her chair. “Another part of the city that used to belong to Merrow,” she muttered, her voice low, edged with apprehension. “You think he won’t notice? Setting up in one of his old haunts? That’s practically waving a red flag in front of a starving wolf.”

Rabbit didn’t flinch. He sipped his coffee, steady, unbothered, before replying. “He’s already watching us, Harleena. Everything we do, every step we take, he’s lurking in the dark, waiting for a weakness. This isn’t about hiding from him—it’s about flushing him out. But it has to be slow. We don’t pull him into the open too fast, or he’ll slip away again. The hotel gives him something to focus on, a point of interest. Something he can’t ignore.”

Jack slid into the empty chair, snagged Harry’s untouched mug, and downed a swallow without asking. He set it down with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Well, if Tobias keeps the lights on and the walls standing, then Vida Nova’s just the first move. A shiny, respectable place for us to look like we’re something more than what we are.” He leaned back, lacing his hands behind his head. “But if it makes Merrow twitch in his shadows? I’d call that a bonus.”

Jack leaned forward, setting his mug down with a sharp clink against the scarred wooden table, his eyes glinting with something restless, the kind of fire that refused to be smothered. “We need to talk about the Ember Circle,” he said, his tone cutting through the low hum of the kitchen like a blade. His voice carried an edge of insistence, as though he had been holding it back for too long already. “It’s time we hit them where it hurts.”

Harleena didn’t even look up at first. She leaned back in her chair, one leg crossed over the other, idly running her fingers along the edge of her dog’s ear while sipping her coffee. When she finally tilted her head toward him, her expression was dry, unimpressed, a faint arch of her brow betraying her sarcasm before the words even left her lips. “Oh, the plan?” she said flatly. “You mean the one you forgot to tell us about before that kid, Jack? That plan?”

Jack smirked, but there was a flicker of guilt in the twitch of his mouth before he shook it off, leaning closer across the table. “Listen, I didn’t bring it up because the timing wasn’t right. But now? After what they pulled, after we just kicked back their attack and lived to tell about it—we can’t let them breathe. We need to strike before they settle, before they can dig their claws in deeper. If we wait, we lose the chance. They need to feel us in their throats.” His voice had sharpened, low but forceful, each word building with the weight of conviction.

Harry had been quiet, nursing his mug, his mind still heavy with all that had happened at the orphanage and the blood he couldn’t scrub out of his thoughts. But at Jack’s words, his grip tightened on the handle, knuckles whitening. He leaned in, his eyes darker than usual behind the gleam of his glasses. “I’m in,” he said quickly, almost too quickly, his voice tinged with

something fierce. “After what they did to those kids? I don’t care where, I don’t care how—we make them pay.” There was no hesitation, no trace of his usual caution. Just the raw hunger for retribution that had been gnawing at him since that night.

Rabbit, always the one to temper the heat with calculation, tapped his finger lightly against the rim of his cup, eyes darting between Jack and Harry. His voice was calm, even, but carried the weight of strategy. “Where do you plan to start?” he asked, not dismissing the idea, but pressing for the shape of it. “We can’t just go charging in blind. You must have something in mind.”

Jack’s smirk returned, sharper this time, as though he had been waiting for that very question. He leaned back, stretching his arms out before folding them across his chest. “I do,” he said, his tone almost casual. “We’re paying a visit to the Unseen.”

Harry blinked, thrown for a moment, suspicion flickering in his gaze. “The Unseen?” he echoed, his tone cautious. “Why the hell would we—”

Jack cut him off, gesturing with his hand as though the answer were obvious. “Because during the orphanage attack, remember who showed up out of nowhere to whisk two of those Circle bastards away? The Unseen took them. And if those soldiers are still breathing, then somewhere, they’re sitting on everything we need. Where they sleep, where they hide, where they’re weakest. Statistically, strategically—whatever word you want to put on it—that’s our opening. That’s where we start.”

Harleena gave a short, humorless laugh, her voice dripping with skepticism as she tossed a glance in his direction. “You think the Unseen are just going to hand them over? You think Jackie Comber is going to invite us in for tea and let us play twenty questions with his prisoners?” She gave a dismissive shake of her head. “They won’t give you that information. Not in a thousand years.”

Jack didn’t flinch at her doubt. Instead, he leaned back in his chair with a sly, knowing grin, his eyes narrowing with that familiar spark of mischief and danger. “Of course they won’t. Not willingly.” He let the pause linger, savoring it, before tilting his head toward her. “But that’s why we have you, Harleena.”

Her lips twitched despite herself, the corner of her mouth betraying the faintest smile. She shook her head, exhaling as if she were trying to push the amusement down, but it clung stubbornly to her expression. Without looking directly at Jack, she reached into her pocket, pulled out a small scrap of dried meat, and slipped it to her dog, who wagged its tail eagerly. “Always me,” she muttered under her breath, but the faint glimmer in her eyes betrayed her satisfaction.

The path to the Whispering Grove was no gentle stroll but a weary trial through the Deadlands’ labyrinth of shadows. The meandering trails twisted and doubled back on themselves like veins in a diseased body, each turn seeming to pull them further from any point of familiarity. The ground was damp, sucking at their boots with every step, a sucking mire that whispered of things buried just beneath the surface. The air was thick with the weight of secrets, each rustle of leaves sounding more like words than wind. Jack and Harleena walked at the front, their shoulders squared with the burden of remembering the last time they had passed through this cursed place, piecing together memories of spectral lights and paths that bent unnaturally. Harleena’s sharp eyes scanned every branch overhead, every root underfoot, while Jack carried himself with a deceptive swagger, though even he glanced back more often than he liked to admit, as if to check the shadows weren’t closing in. They knew the Grove would allow them in only if it wished, and every step felt like they were trespassing on something that never truly forgot.

By the time the trail broke into a clearing, the Crows had braced themselves for silence, for that suffocating stillness the Grove was infamous for. But what they found stole the breath from them in shock. The clearing was alive. Noise, warmth, chaos—things none of them associated with this place—flooded the air. It wasn't empty. It was full of children. Dozens of them, darting across the grass, laughing and shrieking in play, chasing each other between the roots of the colossal tree. Familiar faces leapt out among them—Stoneborn orphans, the survivors of the orphanage's ruin. Every one of them was there save for Ulric, Dadinho, Boquinha, and Cuzao. It was a strange kind of miracle, watching those who had once cowered in smoke and fire now running, climbing, tumbling, their small hands clutching sticks as swords, their cries ringing out like birdsong tangled with ghosts. This grove, usually so suffocating with its silence, now echoed with a strange kind of life, laughter and sorrow fused into one sound, polluting the still air with something the Deadlands rarely heard. It was not peace, not really, but something close enough to sting the heart.

Harry's gaze drifted beyond the bonfire, away from the racing and the shouting, drawn instead to the figure seated half-hidden in the curl of an ancient root. She was still, calm, a sharp contrast to the frenzy of the other children. Silver hair fell over her shoulders, catching the faintest scraps of light and returning them with an eerie, almost unearthly glow, like the reflection of moonlight on dark waters. She looked no older than fifteen, her features smooth, untouched by hardship, but the curve of her smile carried a patience that defied her years, something timeless in the quiet calm of it. She played softly with the twins Harry remembered all too well, her hands guiding theirs with a tender ease, and yet her eyes never left the approaching Crows. She had been waiting for them, he realised. She watched them as one watches a stage, her bright eyes steady, as though their arrival were nothing but a performance she had already seen rehearsed and perfected. She was there to catch the missed line, the unscripted turn, and Harry felt the weight of that gaze settle deep in his bones.

And then his eyes were drawn to him. Jackie Comber. The man was a sight that felt wrong even in this place of wrongness. Shirtless, though the air here chilled like grave-damp, his skin mottled with soot and marked by a life spent scraping against walls that never forgave. His trousers clung to him like they'd lost the will to fight, fabric gnawed into holes as if chewed by rats or something worse. Rubber sandals slapped lazily over socks so mismatched they could have been stitched from two different lives, the left ripped open so a crooked big toe glared out like it held a grudge. He smelled of damp brick and old alleyways, of burnt ozone and the bitter tang of spirit ash clinging to him like perfume no one would claim. Yet for all that ruin, he moved like something untouchable. Silent, unhurried, materializing in front of them without warning, as if the Grove itself had breathed him into existence. His pale eyes, washed out to near colorlessness, carried a thousand-yard stare that wasn't emptiness—it was work, mind always elsewhere, threading together schemes invisible to anyone else. His hair was knotted, tangled, as if dragged from the docks and left to brine until it hardened into rope. He stood in the firelight like a scarecrow of bone and shadow, but when he spoke, his voice was steady, thin as ash falling from a cigarette.

"Crows," he said, without warmth, without malice. Just fact. No greeting. No need. "Come in. The trees gossip if I make you shout."

Jack nodded, his gaze wandering across the grove with deliberate slowness, as if trying to drink in every detail and weigh it against the memory of what he had last seen here. "Looks like you're doing well here, Jackie. The kids are safe, I see. That's good." His voice carried a tone of grudging approval, but also suspicion, as though he couldn't quite reconcile this sanctuary of laughter with the man standing before him. Jackie's pale eyes flickered to the children, then back to Jack, his face unreadable. "Safe as they can be in these dark times," he murmured, voice low, like smoke curling off a dying flame. He leaned forward then, the change subtle but unmistakable, his whole frame growing taut with intent. His expression sharpened, seriousness

pulling his mouth into a thin line. “But I’m sure you didn’t come just to admire the place. Business, I presume?” Straight to the marrow. No pleasantries, no wasted words.

The Crows followed him closer to a bonfire that burned in the clearing, its smoke climbing sluggishly into the canopy and curling back down again as though the trees themselves refused to let it leave. The firelight painted everything in copper and shadow, throwing the silhouettes of children’s play against the rough bark of the roots. But as Jack lowered himself onto a log, he couldn’t ignore what lurked at the edges: the shadowed figures pacing the perimeter, their outlines sharp and predatory, always circling. The laughter of the children clashed with the silence of those watchful shapes, a dissonance that made Rabbit Foot’s throat tighten. He cleared it softly, eyes narrowing toward the patrols that flitted between tree and shadow. “We’d like those two Ember Circle members you got from the orphanage,” Rabbit said, his words careful but firm. “We have some... plans for them.”

Jackie’s smile, faint and paper-thin to begin with, faltered into nothing. His body leaned back, and his gaze cooled into steel. “The two prisoners, you say?” His voice no longer carried the ash-soft drawl from before—it had hardened, clipped at the edges. “I must admit, I’m not so inclined to let them leave with you, Rabbit Foot. They might be of more use to us. Plans of our own,” he added, and though his tone was even, it throbbed with weight. “They’re valuable.”

The fire snapped, throwing sparks into the air. Jack raised his chin, eyes locked on Jackie. “At least let us interrogate them,” he pressed, his words hanging heavy. “At least.” For a long, blistering moment, Jackie just looked at him. His stare was not hostile, but unrelenting, as if he was trying to measure the shadow of Jack’s soul against the heat of the flames. Then he spoke, low, pointed, cutting through the night like a blade. “Interrogate,” he said slowly, “or torture information out of them?”

The words dropped like a stone into still water, sending ripples across the gathered. Silence followed, thick and choking. No one moved, no one dared speak. Even the children’s laughter in the distance seemed to dull for a heartbeat, as if the Grove itself were listening. Jack opened his mouth to counter, his lips parting, breath sharp on his tongue—but before a word could escape, another voice cut into the circle.

A teenage girl appeared, emerging from the shadows with movements so deliberate and unhurried it felt as though she had been there all along, simply waiting for the right moment to step forward. Short, cropped hair framed her face, and every line of her motion seemed carved from grace. She crossed the clearing without hesitation, slipping between the chaos of children as if they parted for her, and came to Jackie’s side. She lowered herself beside him with an ease that implied belonging, her hand resting lightly on his arm. Her presence stilled him, calmed him. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but it carried far, rippling through the firelight with weight far beyond her youthful frame. “Jackie,” she said, her tone both tender and commanding, “let them talk to the prisoners. They’ll need what they know for what’s to come.”

Harleena leaned forward, her eyes narrowing, suspicion and curiosity flashing in her sharp gaze. “Who’s this, then? I didn’t see you at the orphanage when we rescued the kids.” Her voice carried an edge, probing for weakness. Harry, unable to hold back his own question, tilted his head toward Jackie. “Jackie, is this your daughter?”

Jackie’s lips twitched into a chuckle, rough and dry, shaking his head slowly. “Ah, no, Harry. I’d be proud if she were, but no.” He gestured with a faint flick of his hand. “Let me introduce Thalira Ishtar.”

The Crows froze, the name ringing like a struck bell in their minds. Harleena’s eyes widened, disbelief written plainly on her face. “Ishtar? As in Captain Morian Ishtar of the Imperial Police?” she asked, voice tinged with amazement. Thalira’s lips curved into a smile that carried a hint of

mischief, though her gaze remained calm and steady. “Yes,” she said simply, her voice even, “Morian is my older brother. But you need not worry about that.”

Harleena folded her arms tightly across her chest, her mind racing but her curiosity unshaken. “So, how did you end up here, then?” she pressed, her words carrying the demand of someone unwilling to leave a question unanswered. Thalira rose smoothly to her feet, brushing off the edge of her dark cloak with hands as steady as stone. She gave a smile, gentle but cloaked in secrecy, as though the truth was too long and too dangerous to unpack at once. “That’s a long story for another day,” she said, her voice lilting with calm assurance, eyes flicking toward each of them as if she had already judged what they would do with her answer.

She turned to Jackie then, the movement smooth as silk, her chin lifting just enough to make the firelight catch against the pale curve of her cheek. There was something in her presence that didn’t belong to a girl her age, a weight that pressed into the air around her and made her words heavier than they should have been. Authority clung to her like a mantle, unshakable and unearned by years alone. “The future of Doskvol is still uncertain,” she said, each syllable carrying like a bell struck in the distance, soft yet impossible to ignore, “but the Crows have a significant role yet to play. Trust them, Jackie.” The way she said it wasn’t a plea, nor advice—it was an order wrapped in prophecy, something both undeniable and deeply unsettling. Jackie’s pale eyes narrowed as if her words had struck some nerve he kept hidden under his ragged surface. For a moment, the crackle of the fire filled the silence between them. Then he nodded once, a small but definitive movement, as though her voice had pressed directly against his spine. “Alright, then,” he murmured, low but resolute. “You can talk to them. Here. Just be careful how you use them.”

As she rose gracefully to her feet, the aura of certainty still clinging to her, two young girls darted toward her from the circle of children playing near the fire. Their voices chimed like little bells, bright and eager, calling her “Oracle” with innocent insistence. They tugged at her cloak, breathless with excitement, asking her for games, for stories, for ideas that might spark another round of laughter. Thalira’s expression softened instantly, her face warming with a kindness that felt both genuine and fleeting, as if she could slip between gravity and gentleness as easily as stepping between shadows. She knelt down, answering their calls with patient amusement, her hands brushing lightly against their hair as she leaned close to listen.

Jackie’s gaze broke from her, his focus shifting back to the Crows. He jerked his head toward a far trail that forked off into the darker edges of the clearing, a ribbon of shadow carved between roots and branches. His voice was low, flat, but unmistakably commanding. “Follow the shadow,” he instructed, lifting one hand just enough to signal the direction. “It will take you to them. Be brief. Come back here after.” Jack gave a short nod, the glint of determination flashing through his eyes, while Harleena adjusted the strap on her shoulder and moved to follow, her dog padding obediently at her side. Together, the two slipped into the trail Jackie had pointed out, their silhouettes swallowed quickly by the creeping dark of the Grove.

Harry and Rabbit remained where they were, sitting close enough to the fire to feel its warmth against their faces, but not close enough to drown out the strange hum of the Grove around them. Thalira had shifted slightly, giving her full attention to the little girls who clung to her, but once they grew distracted by some game of their own and scampered off into the shadows, her eyes flicked back to the two men. Rabbit leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his sharp gaze narrowing as he studied her more closely. “Oracle?” he asked at last, his voice carrying both skepticism and curiosity.

Thalira tilted her head faintly, strands of silver hair catching the firelight like threads of starlight. “Yes,” she admitted softly, the word almost a sigh. “They keep calling me that. Despite me asking them not to.”

Harry, his brow furrowing, leaned in slightly. His voice was quieter, but laced with tension, the question carrying far more weight than casual curiosity. “Did you send Marcio to us?”

For a long moment, Thalira didn’t answer. Instead, her lips curved into the faintest smile, enigmatic and unfathomable, a smile that seemed to belong to someone who knew far more than she intended to share. Her silence was louder than words, her gaze steady, and in that silence lay something that both unsettled and pulled at Harry. Then, without a word, she lowered herself to the ground, sitting cross-legged with a grace that made the motion seem ceremonial. She lifted her hands and gestured gently for Harry to join her.

Harry hesitated, but curiosity outweighed doubt. Slowly, he slid from the log to the dirt, settling himself in front of her. The earth was cool beneath him, the faint smell of moss and damp soil rising up as he sat. He reached out, placing his hands into hers as she extended them, her palms cool and steady against his skin. Her eyes slid closed, her long lashes resting against her cheeks, and her breathing slowed into a rhythm that sounded like meditation. Harry frowned slightly, unsure what to expect, but then—he felt it.

It came not as a sound, nor as a sight, but as a sensation pressing against the edges of his mind, something vast and heavy, like a door he hadn’t known existed was creaking open inside his skull. The air around them seemed to grow denser, the crackle of the fire muffled, the laughter of the children fading into the background as though the Grove itself were holding its breath. His pulse quickened, a tight knot forming in his chest, and then it hit him fully—an overwhelming rush that was not his own, like stepping into a current too strong to resist.

Harry saw himself somewhere else, as if the world beneath him had slipped away and left only a shadow of sensation behind. It wasn’t a dream, not really, nor was it the same tearing displacement of being pulled into a true vision. He knew he was still sitting there, still in the Whispering Grove with the cool soil pressed against him, still clutching Thalira’s hands, still aware of the faint thrum of the Umbral Rod hidden deep in the folds of his clothes. He could feel it even now, a sharp nagging presence against his ribs, humming like a wasp in a jar. Recognition. His skin prickled because somewhere, impossibly close and impossibly far, he sensed another item. Another relic, another weight in the invisible balance between worlds. Someone else carried one. Someone powerful. But none of that mattered in this moment. He was away.

Thalira’s voice cut through the haze, not spoken aloud but inside his skull, calm as a whisper layered under his own pulse. *Empty your mind. Ask one question, not with words but with your feelings. It makes sense—trust me.* The sound of her voice coiled into his thoughts like silk, steadying him. Harry sucked in a breath and tried, tried harder than he had in months, to empty his mind. To scrape clean the rusted machinery of memory and obsession. But it was never easy anymore. Lately, every time he attempted to clear his head, it clawed back to the same place, the same vision, the same nightmare. That day in the Black Marrow. The hiss of Ladher. Purple smoke rolling like a living death across the floor, curling into throats, staining everything in its reach. Screams. Eyes rolling white. The horror of it burned so deep it was carved into his marrow. It was always there, waiting, the moment he tried to be still.

But this time, something shifted. His focus flickered, the purple smoke faded, and the haze gave way to a shape. A figure. Someone.

A woman.

She sat on the floor, her back pressed against one mirrored wall of a hexagonal chamber, her posture taut with fatigue but not defeat. The room itself was a prison of reflections—every wall paneled with perfect mirrors from floor to ceiling, each catching fragments of her and splintering

her into a kaleidoscope of repeated, fractured selves. Harry could feel the chill of it, the way those mirrored walls seemed to hum with something wrong, something watching.

She looked young, but worn, as though her years had been doubled by the weight of her work. Her long coat was charcoal grey, the kind physicians wore, though this one was stained faintly with soot and streaked with the copper trace of old blood. Pockets sagged, heavy with whatever instruments and vials she carried. Beneath, a dark wool dress clung to her thin frame, its hem worn to threads, a record of nights spent walking streets that never offered rest. Her boots, scuffed and polished with equal determination, rested flat against the cold floor. A scarf, dulled with age and use, was tied with stubborn neatness at her throat.

Her face snapped his attention and refused to let go. Sharp lines, deliberate angles, no softness in her gaze. Pale eyes—blue-grey, cold as ice pressed to the bone—met him with a precision that dissected more than it saw. Her glasses were crooked, one lens spiderwebbed with a break that let jagged light scatter across her cheek. Her dark hair, streaked faintly with silver, was pulled back into a bun that already sagged from exhaustion, strands hanging loose around her face. And those hands—scarred, long-fingered, marked with burns and old cuts—were braced flat against the floor beside her. Even in the vision, he could sense what they were built for: cutting, stitching, holding life and death in the same grip.

At first she didn't notice him. She sat hunched slightly, breathing through her nose, eyes heavy with calculation as if working a puzzle none of the mirrored selves could solve. Then—suddenly—her head jerked up, sharp and unhurried all at once, and her gaze locked on him.

Shock flickered across her eyes, not fear but the alert, cutting surprise of someone who had seen too much to be startled by shadows, but wasn't expecting *this*. Her lips parted, and her voice rang out clear, taut with disbelief and edged with authority. "How the fuck did you get in here?"

The words echoed through the mirrored chamber like they'd been hurled off every surface, fracturing until they were everywhere at once.

And then—gone. The vision snapped like a string pulled too tight, shattering into darkness so abrupt Harry gasped aloud. He was back in the Whispering Grove, his lungs dragging in the damp air of the clearing, his hands still clutching Thalira's, his ass still grounded in the dirt. The fire crackled somewhere behind him, children's laughter weaving faintly through the trees. It was all there, layered over the last searing image he couldn't shake. The mirrors. The woman. The cold detachment in those eyes.

And a name. A single name burned into his mind, insistent, carved into his thoughts as though branded there by the force of the vision. Alice Coleman. But who in all the Void was Alice?

Rabbit sat there and watched the two of them, the firelight catching on their clasped hands, the scene drawn out in a silence that felt longer than the tick of any clock. It was more than just silence—it was weight, something pressing down on the air, stretching each moment like it could snap. From beneath the folds of Thalira's cloak, a faint glow pulsed, dim at first, then steady, a heartbeat of light. Rabbit felt it in his chest too, but not as his own—it thrummed through his Umbral Ring, the metal suddenly warmer against his skin, the hum low and insistent like a string plucked inside his bones. He stiffened, recognizing it instantly. She had another one. Another Umbral relic. He could feel the truth of it in the marrow of him, in the vibration that answered his own. What did this one do for her? What power lingered beneath that calm smile and her strange air of certainty? Was this how she glimpsed what was to come, how she stepped into futures as if they were already written? So many questions coiled in his head, none with answers, and all too dangerous to ask aloud.

Then, suddenly, Harry gasped, sharp and ragged, like a man who had been underwater too long and had finally broken the surface. His body jolted faintly, shoulders shaking with the release of breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Thalira opened her eyes, serene as still water, and gently unthreaded her hands from his. She let him go slowly, as if easing him back into his own body, and rose without hurry to settle beside Rabbit at the edge of the fire. Her movements were smooth, deliberate, carrying the same air of authority she had worn from the first moment she appeared, though her expression was unreadable.

Harry's lips trembled, and when sound came, it was barely more than a whisper, thick with the residue of the vision still clinging to him. "Alice…"

Rabbit leaned toward him instantly, brows furrowed, voice low and careful, though edged with his natural impatience. "Who is Alice?" But Harry didn't answer. His eyes darted instead toward Thalira, puzzled, questioning, searching for something in her face.

Thalira met his stare with calm that seemed unshakable, her pale eyes like lanterns untouched by the fire's flicker. She spoke softly, her tone carrying the unbothered cadence of someone making an observation rather than asking. "Interesting that this is where your mind went."

Rabbit slid a steadying arm under Harry's elbow and helped him up, dusting the dirt from his sleeve, his face betraying both worry and the frustration of not knowing what his friend had just endured. Harry looked pale, shaken, but intact. Rabbit kept a close hand on him all the same, scanning him like he expected to find some wound the vision had carved into flesh.

It was then that Jack and Harleena appeared, stepping out of the shadows of the grove's winding paths, their boots crunching over the damp earth. Their eyes caught the scene instantly—the faint strain in Harry's face, the settled calm in Thalira's posture, Rabbit's protective stance. They didn't need words to ask their questions; the look they exchanged with Rabbit was enough, sharp and demanding. *What happened here while we were gone?*

Harleena was the first to break the silence, her voice carrying a steadiness that was a little too deliberate. "Thanks for your help," she said, directing her words toward Jackie with the clipped tone of someone closing a conversation. "It was very informative."

Jackie gave no reply, no nod, not even the ghost of acknowledgment. He simply stared into the fire, his expression unreadable, his body folded into the smoke and shadow like a man too practiced at ignoring the world to be stirred by gratitude. His silence was its own dismissal, sharper than words.

Rabbit tightened his grip on Harry's arm, firm but careful, and his voice was quieter now, edged with finality. "We must go." He turned toward Jackie, inclining his head in the smallest of gestures, a thanks wrapped in brevity. "Appreciate everything."

They made to leave, shifting away from the fire, but when Rabbit's eyes flicked back to Thalira, she was no longer where she had been. The log where she had sat was bare, the faint trace of her presence already faded into the grove's murmuring hush. No sound of departure, no rustle of cloak or step on soil—she had vanished like smoke dispersing into air.

And then they saw her, far off in the clearing, not cloaked in wisdom or prophecy but laughing, running, her pale hair catching the light as she chased after the orphans. The children's voices rose around her, cries of joy, games spilling into the air, and she was already one of them—an Oracle turned playmate, a shadow turned child. No one had noticed when she slipped away, no one could tell exactly when the distance had grown. All they knew was that she was gone from them, already woven back into the laughter of the young.

Chapter 8: **In the Wake of Assumption**

The night had settled over Doskvol like a damp cloak, heavy with the familiar weight of smoke and salt. The city's gaslamps burned weakly in the distance, their glow fighting a losing battle against the fog that clung to every rooftop and street corner. From the outside, the Crows' house looked as unremarkable as ever—just another patch of brick and wood along the spine of Crow's Ward, a faint ember of light showing through its shutters, warmth caged behind thin walls. But inside, the house breathed with life, the air steeped in the scents of strong coffee, pipe smoke, and the faint tang of disinfectant wafting up from the medical center hidden below. Shadows stretched long over the worn wooden table at the heart of the house, where the Crows sat gathered, their faces lit in shifting hues of gold and black as the single lantern flickered above them.

Rabbit sat back in his chair, his fingers tapping thoughtfully against his mug as he looked from one face to the other. His words came slowly, almost as if he were reluctant to give them weight. "Mich came to me earlier," he began, his tone low, the edge of weariness threading through it. "Said he's been feeling strange about the cat." His eyes narrowed, studying the rim of his mug as if it could explain the oddity itself. "You know the one—the stray that's been hanging around since… well, since my investigation around the Hexspire district." He shifted, and his voice grew sharper. "Mich says it's eerie. Claims it doesn't act like a cat at all. Says it looks at him like a man would. With a glare. A human one."

Harleena, who had been running her fingers absentmindedly through her dog's fur beneath the table, stiffened at that. She looked up sharply, her eyes narrowing, a trace of unease flickering across her face. "A human glare?" she echoed, her voice quiet but edged with suspicion. "That doesn't sound like some alley stray. That sounds like something else. Something that shouldn't be here." Her dog gave a faint whine at her tone, ears twitching. She hushed it absently, though her hand trembled slightly against its head.

Harry gave a scoff, waving one hand as though batting the worry from the air itself. "Mich is a nervous sort. Superstitious. You know how he is—jumps at shadows, mutters prayers when the wind howls wrong." He shook his head, pushing his glasses further up his nose. "He sees a cat and convinces himself it's some ghost in a fur coat. Nothing more." His words carried logic, but his eyes betrayed a faint unease, the memory of that cat's too-lingering presence flickering at the back of his mind.

Jack leaned on the table, smirking faintly as he reached for his drink. "A cat's a cat," he said with a lazy drawl. "If it wants to glare, let it glare. Doskvol's full of things worse than something that shits in the alley and begs for scraps. Mich needs to toughen up. Or buy himself a dog like Harleena's if it'll make him sleep better." His smirk widened slightly as he raised his mug in mock salute.

But Harleena's frown deepened, her gaze still fixed on the shadows in the corners of the room, her instincts nagging at her. She said nothing more, though her silence lingered like smoke, heavy and unsettling. The others let it pass, turning the conversation elsewhere, as if brushing the unease aside might keep it from growing teeth.

Rabbit cleared his throat, steering the talk away. "Speaking of things not sitting right… Trickerium." His eyes flicked toward the floor, to the rooms hidden beneath their feet. "He's still down in the center. Lazarus is watching over him. The old man's brittle as glass, but…" He trailed off, fingers drumming against the wood again. "I just hope he pulls through. Last thing we need is him dying here. Not in our house. Not in our place." His tone carried weight, the fear not of death itself, but of what strings that death might pull loose if it happened under their roof.

Harleena's eyes softened for a moment, her thoughts flickering back to Constant, to the fading smoke that had carried his last laugh away. "He'll live," she said, though the certainty in her voice was a fragile thing, propped up more by will than fact.

Jack leaned forward then, resting his elbows against the scarred table, his grin sharp but his eyes lit with the restless fire of someone who couldn't stand to linger in uncertainty for too long. "Hope's fine and all," he said, "but we've got bigger fish than old Trickerium's bones. We've got a war, and it's waiting on us to stop licking our wounds." He glanced around the table, his grin fading into something colder, steadier. "It's time we plan the attack. Assumption Church."

The words landed like a stone, rippling through the air, shifting the weight in the room. The lantern light flickered against their faces, hardening them, sharpening them. Whatever lay outside in the fog, whatever shadows prowled the alleys, whatever ghost-eyed cats watched from rooftops—all of it fell away beneath the gravity of that name. Assumption. The Circle's ground. The next battlefield.

Harry gave a short, sharp nod, the movement tight as if it were driven by something deeper than simple agreement. "Yeah," he said quietly, his voice carrying a simmering edge. "It's time. We make them pay." His gaze dropped into the depths of his cup, though his thoughts weren't on the bitter coffee anymore. For a moment, his mind betrayed him, tugging back to the vision he'd been dragged through in the Whispering Grove, the cold mirrored chamber, the sharp eyes of that woman—Alice. Her name carved itself into him, burned deep as though the firelight itself had branded it into his skull. Whoever she was, Harry prayed she wouldn't appear in the next fight. He wasn't ready to face her—not yet, not when the memory of her voice, sharp and disbelieving, still rang in his ears like a splinter of glass rattling around his mind. He pushed it down, shoved it away, and focused on the voices at the table, on the here and now.

Harleena leaned forward, her elbows planted on the scarred wood, her mask of skepticism dropped for something more practical. "We already got some of what we needed," she said, her tone steady but heavy, the weight of earlier hours still clinging to her words. "From those Circle bastards we pulled out of the Whispering Grove. The ones we squeezed for answers." Her eyes flicked between them, testing if they remembered the blood and silence that came with pulling information from unwilling mouths. "They talked enough. Assumption Church is their nest, and they've stretched themselves thin trying to hold it. It really is the ideal place to hit. The Circle's been leaning hard on it since they burned Ashvale, but it's weaker than they want people to believe."

Rabbit frowned, his fingers drumming on the side of his mug, the rhythm uneven, betraying the unease under his careful mask. "That was the same night they kicked the Stoneborn kids off the streets around there," he muttered, almost to himself, before looking up at the others. "I hope none of them got hurt in that mess." His words carried a bite of guilt, the kind that sank teeth in and refused to let go.

Jack let out a dry chuckle, though there was little humor in it, only a sharp kind of pragmatism. "If they're alive, they'll be useful," he said, leaning forward with his grin tugging sideways across his lips. "Those kids used to be all over that area before the Circle pushed them out. They'll know the alleys, the blind spots, the cracks in the walls. They'll know the best ways in and out better than any of us." He gestured with one hand, his voice sharpening with the edge of opportunity. "We use that. It's as close to a map as we're going to get."

Rabbit straightened, his jaw set as he nodded, seizing on that thread. "Ulric said he'd help us. Promised he'd give whatever information we needed to put the Circle down." He glanced between Jack and Harleena, the flicker of calculation in his eyes. "He'll know where the kids ended up, what they saw. We can use him to anchor this plan."

Jack's smirk widened, cutting through the tension like a blade. He tapped the table with two fingers, sharp, deliberate, as though he were already laying out the steps of the play. "That's exactly why I've already set it in motion. Sent a message to Ulric through my contacts earlier." He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms with a casual swagger that didn't quite mask the spark in his eyes. "With luck, I'll see him tonight. Then we'll have what we need to make this move real. No more shadows. No more waiting. Just steel and fire where it counts." The lantern overhead guttered with the draft pushing through the cracks of the window, shadows stretching long across their faces as his words hung in the air. The plan wasn't finished, but it had a shape now, the rough edges of purpose cut sharp. All that remained was to carve it clean.

Jim Bob's cough broke the low hum of plotting, his boots dragging across the wood as he lingered just inside the doorway. His face was pinched in a way that didn't suit him, all squint and hesitation. "Erm… guys," he started, voice caught between embarrassment and confusion. "There's… uh… there's a little girl outside." He scratched at the back of his neck, clearly at a loss.

The Crows traded glances, frowns furrowing, surprise etched across their tired faces. This house wasn't the sort of place strangers wandered to—especially not at night. Rabbit's brow arched sharply, Harry adjusted his glasses with a muted sigh, Harleena stiffened in her chair, and Jack's smirk was quick but edged.

At the gate, in the wash of a lantern's weak glow, she stood. Boquinha. Barely nine, though her presence seemed older, heavier, like some shadow slipped into the shape of a child. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, her small hands gripping the edges of her patched dress, her bright eyes too wide, too still. They shone with that sugar-sweet innocence that could soften any heart, but beneath it, if one stared long enough, there was something sharper—something that glimmered wrong in the darkness. She glanced about the grounds as though measuring distance, as though already deciding what belonged to her.

Jack stepped forward first, easy smile curving across his lips, though the way his eyes narrowed told a different story. "Boquinha," he greeted, his tone light, almost teasing, the way one might speak to a child—but each syllable carried a quiet pull of curiosity, a question buried beneath it. "Come on in. We'll talk in the garden." He held the gate open with a sweep of his hand, and she hesitated just long enough to remind them she wasn't nervous at all—only calculating. Then she nodded and stepped through, her pace small, deliberate, following him as if she knew exactly where this would lead.

In the garden, the lantern light made long shadows against the walls, their leaves and stems brushing in whispers that seemed to hush the night. The rest of the Crows gathered, circling into the dim glow—Harleena with her arms folded, Rabbit watching with that quiet sharpness, and Harry perched on a bench with his glasses catching the light.

Boquinha sat when invited, her small frame stiff, her posture too neat for a child. Her knees pressed together, her back straight, her hands folded in her lap like she was sitting for a lesson. She looked at each of them in turn, her gaze bright and guileless, though it lingered just a touch too long, like she was weighing them against something unseen.

Rabbit didn't waste time. His voice cut through the silence, steady and clipped. "We're planning to take back the area east of Ashvale. It's weak right now, and if we don't act before the Ember Circle tightens their grip, we lose it for good." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on her. "We know Ulric's territory got swallowed in that fire. We're going to take it back. But we need to know what we're up against. You know that ground better than any of us."

Boquinha blinked, wide-eyed, her small lips parting slightly as if she were surprised by the gravity of being asked. She tilted her head, gaze drifting slowly from Rabbit to the others, then

back. For a moment, silence hung—too measured, too deliberate. Then she answered, her voice soft as a lullaby, but carrying a weight beyond her years. “The Ember Circle’s got a stronghold in the Assumption Church,” she said, her words clear, too clear, like she had rehearsed them. “They’ve taken over the church, and they’re using it as their base.” She paused, her expression twisting briefly, the mask of innocence cracking just enough to show something bitter behind it. “I don’t like the new priest, though. He’s not like Father Tom.”

Her gaze wandered, growing distant, her voice dipping low as though speaking to herself. “Father Tom was the real priest. He was good to us Stoneborn kids… always had bread to share, always opened the doors when the night was too cold. He called us by name. He knew us.” Her small fingers tightened together in her lap, knuckles whitening. “I… liked him a lot.” The words hung heavy, almost trembling, but her eyes were dry. Then, suddenly, she blinked, her head snapping back with a practiced kind of lightness, the smile painted bright once again. “But now… there’s this new priest. He doesn’t care about us. He doesn’t even look at the kids. He’s rude. He’s with them.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice in a conspiratorial whisper, as if she were sharing a bedtime secret. “He’s one of theirs. The Circle. If you want to take the church, you’ll have to get rid of him first.”

Rabbit nodded, rubbing his chin as he processed her words, his eyes flicking briefly to Harleena and Harry before returning to the child. “So,” he said slowly, “we take down the priest, clear out his men, and hold the church ourselves. With it, the ground around it. That’s the step.”

Harry adjusted his glasses, his gaze lingering on Boquinha like he was trying to read something in her face. His tone was careful, but there was a tension in it. “You’re sure about this? That he’s Circle?”

Boquinha’s expression grew briefly stern, too sharp for her years, before smoothing out again. She nodded, her voice calm, deliberate. “I’ve seen him. He doesn’t go anywhere without their men. They watch the doors, the alleys, even the bell tower. He whispers with them, not us. He doesn’t bless anyone anymore.” She tilted her head then, smiling, but the smile stretched a little too long. “He’s theirs. Not ours.”

Jack leaned in, his elbows resting on his knees, his grin soft but predatory beneath it. “We’re going to move on it. But we’ll need more than just the idea of him. We’ll need your help. Can you get us inside when the time comes? Can you lead us right to him?”

Her smile bloomed instantly, dazzlingly sweet, her teeth small and white in the dim light. She answered without hesitation, her voice as light as if she’d been asked to play a game. “Of course I can help. I know the church better than anyone.” She rocked slightly in her seat, almost childlike at last, swinging her feet that didn’t quite touch the ground. “I can take you right to him. Straight to his heart.”

The garden was quiet then, save for the faint rustle of leaves and the distant drip of water from the gutter. Her words settled among them, sugary on the surface, but beneath them something darker curled, like ivy twisting around old stone.

The group sat in the dim glow of the lanterns, their faces cast half in shadow, half in the weary light of decisions made too quickly and too heavily. They looked at each other, each gaze carrying its own mixture of skepticism and resolve, as though they were weighing both the risk and the inevitability of what had just been set into motion. Rabbit’s jaw worked as he rubbed a thumb along the rim of his cup, then he set it down with a decisive thud against the wood. His voice came steady, low, but carrying that edge of authority he always wore when the stakes were high. “Alright,” he said, his tone cutting through the air like the final stroke of a blade. “But we do this cleanly. No mistakes. We can’t afford sloppiness on this one. And once the priest is

gone, we replace him with men we can trust. Our men." The weight of his words hung heavy, like mortar sealing a stone in place, leaving no room for doubt.

Before anyone could add another word, Boquinha looked up at them from where she sat, her small frame still perched stiffly, her feet swinging just shy of the floor. Her voice slipped into the air with that unnerving softness she always carried, but there was something buried inside it, something that didn't quite fit the innocence painted across her features. "Are you really going through with this?" she asked, tilting her head, her gaze sharp in a way it shouldn't have been. Her bright eyes flickered between each of them, pausing just long enough on Harry to make his chest tighten. "You'll kill him, won't you?"

The silence that followed was brittle. Harry adjusted his glasses, his throat dry, but he forced his voice into something steady, something he hoped sounded certain, even if doubt gnawed in the corners of his mind. "Yes," he said firmly, nodding once, his hand tightening on his knee. "We'll kill him. The Ember Circle has to go." His words echoed, final, but as they left his mouth, he felt the strange unease creep deeper. For just a heartbeat, he saw past her childlike mask—the innocence in her tone, the sweetness of her face—and something in the way she asked struck him wrong. Too deliberate. Too rehearsed. For a split second, he questioned if he was looking at a little girl at all, or if something else, something darker and older, peered out from behind her eyes. He swallowed the thought down quickly but made a quiet, firm note in his mind. He would keep his eyes on Boquinha. Doskvol thrived on masks, on deceptions layered until truth itself was buried. He'd been fooled before. He would not be fooled again.

Boquinha's smile widened at his answer, stretching with a brightness that should have been disarming, but only twisted tighter around his unease. A faint glimmer, like a shimmer of age far older than her nine years, crept into her gaze as though she were savoring something no child should. "Good," she said, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm, the words spilling out with an eagerness that rang wrong in the stillness of the night. "Let's do it then."

The decision was sealed in that moment. One by one, the Crows nodded, each in their own way, the pact unspoken but binding. They agreed to meet again the very next day, each already preparing themselves for the blood and fire that would follow. The lantern light flickered over their faces, their shadows stretching long across the garden wall, as if even the night itself leaned closer to listen to the deal they had struck.

Boquinha lingered by the gate as the group broke apart, her small hand resting lightly on the wood, her head tilted as if caught in some thought she would never share. For a moment, she seemed to drift, her eyes distant, her lips curling faintly as though amused by something only she could see. Then she turned, skirts brushing against her legs, and slipped back into the night with the unhurried pace of someone who already knew what tomorrow would bring.

Harry's gaze followed her until the darkness swallowed her whole. He stood there longer than the rest, the cool air biting at his skin, his breath fogging faintly as if reminding him he was still here, still real. He adjusted his glasses again, though they didn't need adjusting, and frowned. He couldn't shake it—that oddness in her tone, the way she seemed to ask for death like it was a song she already knew by heart. There was something off about her, something he couldn't quite pin down. And in Doskvol, anything you couldn't pin down usually came back to bury you. But not tonight. Tonight the mission mattered more. Tonight he had to trust that the Crows—his family, for better or worse—could handle whatever the shadows decided to throw their way. Still, as he finally turned back toward the house, the thought gnawed at him. Masks only lasted so long before they cracked. And when hers did, he needed to be ready.

The sun hung low in the sky as the group assembled outside the grand Assumption Church, a burnished coin pressed flat against a bruise-blue horizon, its tired light pooling along the worn steps and the cracked saints that watched from their niches with stone patience. It was bustling with activity—people gathering in the courtyard, speaking in hushed tones as the evening mass was about to begin—families drifting together like small rafts, widows with shawls knotted tight against the chill, laborers with coal under their nails, a scatter of street urchins on the edges angling for alms; all of it laid over the steady bell-chime and the papery whisper of hymn-sheets. The air felt thick with anticipation as Harleena stood with the others, observing the church; she took in the chipped angels and the soot-eaten cornices, the incense-laden breath that sighed from the doors, the way the nave swallowed sound and gave it back as a shiver. Its stone façade, weathered by time, seemed at odds with the solemn beauty of the place—pitted and scarred, yes, but stubbornly noble, as if faith had grown barnacles and still refused to sink. Inside, the whispers of prayer echoed out, carried by the breeze, a tide of murmurs that washed across the courtyard and tangled with the city's salt and smoke. But there was no mistaking the tension in the air—soldiers in plain clothes who were not parishioners, watchers who watched too carefully, the sort of stillness that collects just before a storm tears its first seam. Boquinha, small and seemingly innocent, stood with her arms crossed, her bright eyes scanning the scene, a child's posture wrapped tight around something practiced; she looked over at the group and nodded, her voice soft but confident. "This is the best time," she said, her gaze flicking toward the entrance, where a procession of people was beginning to file in. "They won't question us if we're here for the service, especially with so many people."

Rabbit Foot, ever the cautious one, raised an eyebrow, the gesture slight but edged like a warning; he let his gaze comb the crowd—door wardens, the too-broad shoulders near the font, the pale-faced acolyte who kept glancing left—before speaking. "Too many people. We could get lost in the shuffle, but it makes things messier. What if they spot us?" Boquinha's eyes narrowed as she glanced at the others, the faintest smile curling on her lips, bright as a ribbon and just as capable of strangling if you pulled it wrong. "We'll blend in. Or… we can take a different route. The back door. I've used it before. Less attention." The Crows exchanged glances, that wordless calculus they'd learned to do with one another—weight the risk, taste the odds, decide. Rabbit Foot wasn't convinced; the corner of his mouth dipped as he measured alley angles and sight lines. "The backdoor sounds more promising, but there's still the risk of running into trouble. We don't know who's watching." Jack, in his Ironscar Keep official disguise, adjusted his collar as he stepped forward, smoothing the cheap brass badge with a thumb, the starch in his cuffs cutting lines at his wrist, the smell of ink and ledgers painted over his usual swagger. "I'll take the front. If I'm seen, I can pass for someone official. Rabbit, you're with me." Rabbit hesitated for a moment before nodding, tugging his coat to hide the telltale places where blades liked to glint. "Alright, we'll go through the front. But we keep it low. The moment it feels like we're being watched, we pull out." Above them, pigeons settled and stirred, shedding small grey feathers that clung to wet stone; below, the press of bodies shifted as the doors creaked wider and the choir's first long note unspooled like a thread.

Boquinha nodded in agreement, and the nod had that odd, almost adult finality to it. "That's the plan. But we can't split up too much. It'll be easier if we keep some of us together." Her gaze shifted to Harry. "What about you?" Harry shifted nervously, running a hand through his hair, feeling sweat gather at the rim of his spectacles despite the evening cool; the memory of mirrors and a woman's ice-pale stare tried to rise and he pushed it down like a bad swallow. "I'll go around back. Might be more useful if I'm not right in the middle of everything." Harleena, still taking in the scene, let a small smile tilt her mouth—it wasn't comfort, it was readiness—and turned to Boquinha. "I'm with you. Let's get in through the back. If this goes south, I want to be in position to do something about it." Boquinha's eyes sparkled with a mix of excitement and calculated confidence as she nodded, a child's thrill lacquered over something older. "Let's move. Stick to the plan, and we'll be inside before they even know it." Around them the congregation flowed, lanterns lifted like minor constellations, the scent of wax and salt-sweat

and old stone; the Crows breathed once, twice, and then bled their shapes into the current—two toward the lighted doors, two toward the shadowed lanes—like dark birds folding into different branches of the same tree.

With that, they split. Jack and Rabbit headed toward the front entrance, walking confidently among the masses of churchgoers as they approached the main doors, letting themselves be folded into the river of parishioners with the easy, practiced gait of men who'd learned to breathe under pressure; Jack adjusted the line of his borrowed Ironscar collar and let his eyes soften the way officials' eyes do when they believe they're owed answers, while Rabbit's gaze skimmed the nave's yawning mouth and the spill of incense like a blade testing cloth, counting exits and elbows and the places where a man might fall without being seen. The bell tolled and the air lifted with a hush that was not silence so much as a city holding its breath, and in that held breath Harleena and Boquinha slipped away along the church's flank, their footfalls ghosting over grit and old soot, past drainage spouts and rain-blackened stone, the child's small shadow skimming tight to the wall while Harleena kept half a pace behind and half a world away in her head.

The rear of the church was quieter, but no less tense; the noise of the square turned to a low rumble like distant surf, and the smell of old stone and damp mortar pressed close, muffling sound as if the alley itself were listening. Harleena kept her distance, staying hidden behind the corner of the building where a cracked saint's niche gave just enough cover to let her watch without casting her shadow, and she waited for Boquinha to make her move, holding herself still the way hunters do when the bird is near. The small girl stood outside the backdoor, a squat iron thing with paint chewed down to scabbed metal, her eyes flicking back toward Harleena before she turned and called out to another child with a small, neat beckon of her fingers; Harleena tensed, wondering what was about to unfold, her hand hovering near the veil at her belt. The girl Boquinha had summoned looked no older than ten, wearing ragged clothes that blended with the city's rougher streets, a hem unthreading into little flags and a sleeve polished shiny from being wiped against a runny nose; she nodded quickly and ran off, feet whispering over grit as she disappeared around the corner like a trick of light. Boquinha waited patiently, her hands clasped in front of her, barely moving, the posture so poised it felt rehearsed, and Harleena couldn't help but watch her every move, sensing that the girl had something planned and had planned it long before tonight; a moment later, the other child returned, breath stuttering and eyes bright, holding something small and squirming in her hands. It took Harleena a moment to recognize it—a rat, slick and terrified, all tendon and yellow teeth and the ragged saw of its breath—her stomach tightened with that old city revulsion and her fingers twitched toward her dog's collar on reflex; she felt a knot twist in her gut as she watched the girl slice open the rodent with a knife too clean for a child to carry. Blood poured out onto her hands, hot and rope-red, threading her lifelines and dripping to the stone in a quick, obscene rhythm, a grotesque display that made Harleena's stomach turn; the girl smeared the blood onto her palms with an unsettling calmness, rubbing it in like soap, her face a mask of focus as if she were copying a lesson set in front of her. Harleena's eyes widened in shock—she had no idea what Boquinha had in mind, but the intensity of this small act was chilling, the way the knife had flashed and vanished, the way the little accomplice's crying started on a dime, a high, burred wail that bounced off the stone and raised the tiny hairs along Harleena's arms. Then, as the girl began to fake cry—her voice high and strained, the kind of keening that pulls doors open faster than any key—Harleena felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up; Boquinha, without skipping a beat, stepped up to the back door and knocked, her innocent demeanor still firmly in place, chin tucked, shoulders rounded just so, a picture out of a pitying sermon. The door swung open, hinges coughing, revealing a soldier—his uniform slightly askew, the collar sweated dark and one button hanging by a thread, but the hardness in his eyes unmistakable, a flinty contempt that took in blood and child and street and found them all beneath him. Harleena's breath caught in her throat. There was something distinctly off about this man, something that

screamed disdain, a dead patience behind the gaze like a butcher waiting for the animal to stop kicking so the work could go on.

“What the hell do you want?” he snapped at Boquinha, his voice dripping with irritation, the syllables clipped like the bite of steel on stone. His lip curled, eyes narrowing into slits as though even looking at the girl was an insult to his time. “Stop knocking and get lost. We don’t have time for this.” His tone was the familiar rasp of authority worn thin by boredom, a man convinced the world owed him obedience. But Boquinha didn’t flinch, didn’t even blink. Her face was a perfect mask of innocence, the kind that could melt into any crowd and disarm suspicion with a single glance. She pointed with small, blood-streaked fingers to the other girl, who was still on the ground, rocking and crying, her palms smeared red from the rat’s gore. “Please,” Boquinha said softly, the tremor in her voice crafted with chilling perfection, thick with feigned desperation. “She’s hurt. She needs help.”

The soldier scowled, his eyes narrowing further as he looked down at the crying child. The sneer twisted his mouth until his teeth showed, yellow and clenched. “What, you think I’m supposed to believe this? You’re just another filthy street rat—go find someone else to beg from.” His words dripped with disgust, spat like a man flicking ash from his hand, eager to be rid of the sight. Harleena watched from her shadowed vantage, her stomach tightening. There was no compassion in his eyes, only contempt. But Boquinha pressed on, undeterred, her persistence unnerving in its steadiness. “She’s not faking,” Boquinha insisted, her tone syrup-sweet but underlined with a knife’s edge of urgency. “Please... please help.”

The soldier’s jaw worked, muscles jumping in irritation. His hand twitched against the doorframe, as if torn between slamming the door shut and dragging the girls off by their hair. “I don’t want to deal with you—go play your games elsewhere.” His words were colder now, final. But then Boquinha tilted her chin just slightly, her bright eyes wet with the gleam of fake tears, and took a single, deliberate step closer. Something in that tiny movement cracked through his disgust. He looked down at the girl still kneeling in the dirt, crying with bloodied hands, and his demeanor shifted, if only by a fraction. The sneer softened—not with kindness, but with the exasperated weariness of a man who finally gave in to inconvenience. “Fine,” he growled, teeth gritted. “I’ll take a look at her.” He bent low, shoulders hunching, his breath coming out hot and sour as he reached for the crying girl, muttering, “Stupid little—”

That’s when Boquinha struck.

The transformation was instant, vicious. In a flash, her small hands darted for a loose brick at the ground’s edge, her movements sharp with predatory purpose. With terrifying speed and no hesitation, she swung it upward, the stone connecting with the soldier’s skull in a sickening crack that seemed to reverberate off the church’s cold walls. The man reeled back, dazed, his eyes rolling, but he was still on his feet. Boquinha didn’t pause. She launched herself at him, a blur of limbs and bloodied hands, shoving him with surprising strength until he toppled to the ground with a grunt. She straddled his chest and brought the brick down again, harder, until his body twitched and finally slumped into unconsciousness.

Harleena’s heart hammered in her ribcage, the sound deafening in her ears. She had expected manipulation, a clever trick to earn their entry—but not this. Not the sheer brutality, not the feral swiftness of the girl’s violence. Her hands, so small and delicate moments ago, were now painted in red, and the blank focus in her eyes was nothing a child should ever wear. The innocence she’d displayed had crumbled into something far darker, something Harleena hadn’t seen coming.

But before the shock could settle, the door yawned open wider. A second soldier emerged, the slam of boots on stone cutting the night. His eyes went wide at the sight of his comrade

sprawled on the ground, blood streaking across his temple. “Stop!” he bellowed, voice cracking with fury and alarm, his hand already darting for the pistol at his belt. “What the hell is going on out here?!”

Fear rippled like ice through Harleena’s chest as the barrel of the weapon cleared its holster. She couldn’t afford to wait—not even a breath longer. Her lips parted, sharp with instinct, and she loosed a piercing whistle. At once her dog surged forward, claws scraping against the stone, teeth bared in a furious snarl as it lunged for the soldier’s legs. He cursed, stumbling, as the animal clamped onto his calf with bone-crushing force, jerking him off balance.

Boquinha was already moving, slick with blood, fists flying. She pummeled the man with wild, merciless strikes, her small body vibrating with a violence that seemed impossible for her frame. Each blow landed with startling weight, the sound of knuckles on flesh mingling with the soldier’s grunt of pain and the growl of Harleena’s hound. But the soldier fought back, kicking out hard, one hand still fumbling with his weapon even as he tried to fend them off.

Harleena’s vision narrowed, her pulse a roar in her ears. They had to end this now, before his shouts brought more. She reached for the veil. In an instant, the world around her folded inward. The familiar darkness spilled out like ink, curling tendrils that spread into a suffocating fog, cloaking the garden in its oppressive shadow. The air thickened, damp with spectral weight, and to all eyes but hers the night had turned to pitch. Inside the veil, Harleena moved with clarity, her sight cutting through the fog like lantern light. She lunged, sliding low, and slammed her weight into the soldier’s side. He toppled hard, the crack of his skull against the stone lost beneath the veil’s heavy silence.

Boquinha’s fists still rained down on the first man, though his body had long since gone limp. The scene was a grotesque ballet of child and soldier, innocence and savagery entangled in the thick folds of darkness. But the second man, gasping and flailing, sensed the danger. He tore free of Harleena’s grip, panic fueling him, and scrambled back into the open door of the church. His boots pounded against the wooden threshold as he vanished inside, his shouts already rising to call others.

Harleena’s heart sank, heavy with the weight of failure. The veil flickered, its dark fingers unraveling, the mist dissipating like smoke in the wind. Their cover was gone, and with it their chance to silence him cleanly.

As the last traces of shadow thinned into the daylight, Boquinha straightened. Her face, smeared crimson, was calm. Too calm. She wiped her palms against her tattered skirt as though blood was nothing more than dirt, and then her bright, uncanny eyes found Harleena’s. “We need to go inside now,” she said coolly, her tone clipped, almost commanding, as though the violence had not rattled her in the slightest. She motioned for Harleena to follow her.

Harleena stood rooted for a beat, chest heaving, the metallic tang of blood and veil-smoke still heavy on her tongue. She struggled to steady herself, her mind replaying the sheer speed of the girl’s brutality, the coldness of her gaze. She had seen children hardened by Doskvol before, but never like this. Never so young, never so perfectly able to slide between mask and monster. And yet, the mission pressed forward. She swallowed hard, forced her breathing even, and followed Boquinha around the corner, her grip tightening on the veil as though its weight might steady her shaking hands.

Harleena and Boquinha moved quickly, their footsteps whispering against the damp earth as they turned the corner of the church and came upon a high stone wall that loomed like the spine of some ancient beast, separating the private garden from the rest of the grounds. The wall was rough, weather-stained, its surface streaked with moss that caught the dim light and glistened faintly in the night. Without hesitation, Boquinha scrambled upward, her small hands and bare

fingers finding the cracks and footholds with the instinctive grace of someone who had climbed walls all her life. She moved too smoothly for her age, too certain of her balance, like a creature made for slipping where others stumbled. Harleena followed right after, her cloak brushing against the stone, her muscles burning as she pulled herself up. She didn't bother questioning the sudden urgency—it was written plainly in the air around the child. At the top, Boquinha's hand darted down, surprisingly steady, surprisingly strong, and clasped Harleena's wrist to haul her the rest of the way. Together they vaulted over and dropped into the garden on the other side, landing with a soft crunch as soil and loose gravel shifted beneath their boots.

The garden was secluded, hemmed in by overgrown hedges and a few spindly trees that twisted up toward the dark sky. The air smelled faintly of damp leaves and wet bark, carrying the kind of earthy tang that clung to one's nostrils long after leaving. It was quiet here, unnervingly so, the muffled hum of voices from the church inside reduced to faint vibrations that seemed to echo through the very stone. The tension buzzed in the silence between them, an invisible thread pulled taut. They moved swiftly, eyes scanning the hedges, the shadowed corners, until they spotted movement ahead. Harry crouched low behind a scraggly bush near the garden's edge, his glasses catching the faintest shimmer of light as he lifted his head. Startled for a breath, he stiffened before his expression softened in recognition. "Nice of you to join the party," he whispered, standing with a subtle stretch of his knees, shaking the stiffness from his legs. His voice was steady but carried the rasp of someone who had been waiting too long in uneasy silence. "I've already got us a good look around."

Boquinha kept her bright eyes fixed on him, not blinking, her suspicion hidden beneath the innocent tilt of her head. She didn't relax, not even in the presence of an ally. "What's the deal?" she asked, her tone light, almost casual, but there was a calculating patience in the way she lingered on each syllable.

Harry gestured toward the far side of the garden, where a dull glint revealed a metal door half-concealed by vines. It stood slightly ajar but locked tight, its hinges scarred and worn as if strained by constant use. "That door's been used frequently—look at the wear," he murmured, his brow furrowed in concentration. "I've been listening. There's shouting from inside, but it's not panic. Not pleas. These aren't the shouts of someone begging for help—it's command. Angry, clipped. Whoever's behind that door is giving orders." He shook his head slowly, his tone uneasy. "Whoever they are, they're not looking for rescue."

Harleena's gaze flicked to Boquinha, then back to Harry. Her voice was low, calm but edged. "Do you think someone's locked in there?"

Harry pursed his lips, adjusting his glasses as if clearer sight might untangle the mystery. "I don't know. But it doesn't sound like prisoners. More like... a fight for control. Some kind of power struggle." His words carried weight, each syllable sharpened by his unease.

Harleena nodded, her mind already pulling at threads, stringing together possibilities. "Interesting," she muttered under her breath. "We'll have to investigate that later." She shifted, slipping one hand into her cloak and pulling free a ring of keys, the metal glinting dully in the half-light. "We had a brief encounter with some of the soldiers before we got here," she explained coolly. "They weren't exactly welcoming, but I managed to pick something useful off one of them. Keys. I think these will fit."

Boquinha's eyes widened just slightly, the kind of reaction that looked like childish disbelief but lingered a little too long. "Keys? When did you have time to grab those?" she asked, her voice sharper now, suspicion threading beneath the innocent lilt.

Harleena smirked, her lips curling in that sly, familiar way that never revealed more than she wanted. “I’m very quick at what I do,” she said lightly, dismissing the question with a shrug of her shoulder, her tone casual as if pocketing keys from a hostile soldier was as natural as breathing.

Boquinha stared, her gaze narrowing faintly, shifting from Harleena’s face to the keys now clutched in her hand. “I wasn’t aware you were so... prepared,” she muttered softly, almost to herself, though the words cut with a strange kind of edge, like a child repeating a line meant to mask a deeper thought. Harleena let it pass, refusing to let the comment settle, her focus snapping back to the locked door.

Then, the silence was broken by the crackle of static in Harleena’s ear. Jack’s voice burst through the device, raw and urgent, panic bleeding through the grainy connection. “Harleena!” His tone was sharp, breathless. “I need help. I’m in trouble.”

Harleena froze for half a heartbeat, her features tightening, the calm composure cracking into pure determination. “I’m going,” she said at once, her tone clipped, decisive. She turned her eyes to Boquinha and Harry, her stare narrowing, her words carrying the command of someone who would not be argued with. “You two stay here. Don’t touch that door until the rest of us are back. Understand?”

Harry gave a tight nod, his brows knitting in concern. “You sure you want us to stay back? What if something happens, what if—”

“Trust me,” Harleena cut him off, her words low but steel-edged. “I’ll handle whatever Jack’s stumbled into. You’ve got the keys. I trust you’ll be smart enough not to try this without us.”

Boquinha’s arms crossed over her chest, her small frame radiating a quiet defiance. She said nothing, but her eyes tracked Harleena with a strange intensity, suspicion like smoke curling in her gaze. She gave only a shallow nod, her silence louder than words.

Harleena didn’t linger. She turned and moved swiftly toward the far end of the garden, her cloak catching on the edges of the hedges as she slipped into the shadows. Within moments, her figure dissolved into the night, leaving Harry and Boquinha alone, the keys glinting faintly between them, the locked door waiting like a held breath.

As everything unfolded behind the church with Harleena, Boquinha, and Harry, Jack and Rabbit made their way through the front entrance. The doors creaked open on iron hinges that sounded like a groan from the bones of the place, and the church greeted them with the soft thrum of murmured conversations, the papery rustle of prayer leaflets, and the resin-sweet bite of incense that caught in the back of the throat. The interior was vast, candlelight dripping gold along the ribs of high arches that leaned together like clasped hands, and the pews were rapidly filling with people eager for the mass, coats brushing wood, whispers folding into a single tide. Rabbit’s nerves were on edge. The sheer number of bodies and the casualness of it all made him feel exposed, as if the crowd itself were a trap that would spring the second he breathed too loudly. Casualty could occur today. And he knew it. His gaze snagged on a pair of men posted near the narthex—too brute-looking, too square in the shoulders, too familiar in the wrong ways. He knew those faces from smoke and blood; his gut twisted. He dipped his chin and spoke without moving his lips. “Two of them by the doors,” he murmured, voice thin and flat. “Strong arms, bad eyes.” Jack didn’t turn his head. “So we belong more than they do,” he breathed back, a ghost of a smile cutting across his mouth. “Walk like you’ve never been anywhere else.” Jack seemed less concerned with blending in and more focused on gathering whatever the room would give him. He peeled away with that practiced swagger of a man who has never been told no, slipping up to the reception desk where an elderly woman arranged missals and

candle slips. He softened his posture, put a little warmth into the eyes, and let his smile unfurl just enough to feel safe. “Evening, ma’am,” he said, tone pitched low and smooth, respectful without being servile. “Full house tonight. Always a comfort.” She looked up, the fine lines around her mouth deepening, and Jack saw the worry that lived behind her polite expression—a cloud moving across an otherwise still sky. “It is,” she said gently, “though I wish it were under happier spirits. People carry too much trouble into these pews lately.” Jack nodded as if he felt it with her, tilting his head in a sympathetic angle. “Trouble keeps regular hours in this city,” he said. “I’m with Ironscar Keep—administrative, not enforcement,” he added, slipping the weight of a fabricated badge with a casual lift of his hand. “I’d hoped to speak with Father Tom about arranging confession sessions for inmates. Helps keep the devils in their cages.” The elderly woman’s smile pinched at the corners, her fingers tightening on the stack of leaflets. “I’m sorry to say, Father Tom’s been out sick,” she replied, her voice quiet. “Nobody’s seen him lately. He only communicates by letter now. But we have a substitute priest while he’s away.” Jack let a flicker of concern cross his face, the perfect measure of official disappointment. “I see. Well, could I meet the substitute after the mass?” “Of course,” she said with a reassuring nod that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Stay around, and after the mass, I’ll make sure you meet him.” Jack inclined his head. “You’re a blessing,” he said softly, then folded himself back into the slow eddy of parishioners as if he were one of them, eyes quietly counting exits, habits, rhythms—the church breathing around him.

While Jack kept the woman looking the other way with the gentle machinery of small talk, Rabbit scanned for angles, for shortcuts that only existed if you believed hard enough in them. His eyes found a back door half-lost behind a marble pillar, its paint scuffed by many hurried hands. Church workers moved through the aisles with the blinkered focus of people who had too much to do and not enough time to see who was doing what beside them. Rabbit drifted to the door like a shadow deciding to be a man, cast one quick look over his shoulder, and let the lockpicks whisper out of their oilcloth wrap into his fingers. Tumblers clicked like teeth deciding to smile; the latch eased; the door sighed. He slipped inside and pulled it to, letting the lingering incense and murmur of prayer fall to a muffled hush behind him. The room beyond was dark and damp, the air heavy with the musty smell of old furniture and forgotten things. Dust floated like drowned snow in the beam from a high, grimy window. Stacks of wooden crates, a leaning ladder, shelves lined with cheap tin candlesticks, altar cloths gone stiff with age, even crates of non-alcoholic wine with labels puckered from humidity—junk and ritual, all in one breath. Rabbit felt frustration flare and fade; a dead end is still a map if you listen. He pivoted to go, then froze at the soft shuffle of footsteps bleeding in from deeper inside the warren. Curiosity is a blade that cuts both ways. He drew his knife and moved toward the sound, shoulders tilted, weight low, letting the shadow use him as much as he used it. The steps grew louder, deliberate, and then he saw the shape—broad, squared, and still. A large man, jaw like a cinderblock, the cut of his coat wrong for clergy and perfect for violence. Ember Circle. The gun in his hand caught a lick of light and threw it back like a dare.

Rabbit’s heart ticked faster, not fear so much as the tightening of a spring. “Alright,” he whispered to himself, almost amused, “dance with me.” He snatched an empty bottle from a crate and snapped it across the flagstones with a crack like a pistol shot. The soldier’s head snapped toward the noise, the muzzle swinging. It was enough. Rabbit went in at once, knife low and hungry for the throat. The soldier was quicker than his bulk promised; he pivoted, slammed the barrel into Rabbit’s wrist, metal striking bone with a hollow, bruising clonk that rang up the arm. The knife skittered, sketched a silver arc, and clattered into the dark. They collided, bodies thudding into stacked chairs, wood scraping stone. Rabbit had the speed, the angles, the practiced cruelty of close work; the soldier had mass and leverage and no poetry in him at all. A shoulder like a battering ram drove him into the wall; mortar dust kissed his teeth. He rode the impact, tried to slide under, to hook a knee; the soldier trapped his wrist and twisted. Pain came bright and stupid; air left his lungs in a surprised bark. “Easy there, little crow,” the soldier hissed through clenched teeth, breath hot with bitter coffee and metal. “You picked the wrong vestry to

play saint.” Rabbit threw his head forward, aiming for the nose; the man jerked just enough; skull met cheekbone; both saw bright pinwheels. The soldier’s reply was simple and efficient—a short, mean punch to the temple, delivered with the indifference of a man knocking on wood. The world tilted. Rabbit felt the floor reach up to him like a blanket and then it all went soft around the edges. As his vision blurred, he heard the soldier mutter, almost to himself, “Need to report back. This’ll make the boss smile.” Fingers like iron rummaged him with the speed of practice—inner pocket, waist, boot, the places where men hide what matters. The hand paused. The breath hitched. The soldier drew it out with a small, reverent disbelief: the Umbral Ring—an item thought to be lost to the world of Doskvol. A powerful artifact, now in the hands of someone like Rabbit. The brass and shadow of it seemed to drink the thin light, its edges wrong in a way that made the hair along the soldier’s arms lift. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he breathed, wonder souring into a grin. “Viper’s going to love this.” He pocketed the Ring with a quick, covetous tug, as if even the air might try to steal it back, then bent and took Rabbit under the arms, dragging his unconscious weight to a dark corner behind a rack of moth-eaten vestments. Fabric swayed like dead saints as the body slid into shadow. The soldier crouched there a beat, listening to the church’s heartbeat through stone—the distant swell of hymn, the rise and fall of a priestly cadence, the shiver of a door somewhere. He wasn’t sure who the man was or why he was here, but he now knew that the Crows were behind the attack on the church. “Crows in the rafters,” he muttered, wiping Rabbit’s blood from his knuckles onto a linen meant for sacraments. “Let’s see how they pray when the fire starts.” He straightened, jaw set, and stalked off to report, the stolen Ring burning like a secret sun in his pocket.

Outside, Jack began to grow anxious. It had been longer than expected. Rabbit hadn’t checked in, and something didn’t sit right with him. The incense haze spilling from the church doors mixed with the faint chill of Doskvol’s evening air, but instead of calming him, it gnawed at his nerves. Jack tugged at his collar, his eyes moving like a gambler’s across a table of unfamiliar cards. Something was wrong. His gut told him so, and Jack had learned never to doubt the gut—it kept you alive in a city where everything else wanted you dead. He spotted one of the larger men—the brute he had been eyeing earlier—standing near the front steps. The man was broad in the shoulders, his stance stiff, his gaze sweeping the crowd with the restless energy of someone not praying but hunting. Jack forced his body to loosen, to sway just enough like he didn’t care, sliding toward him with a smile tucked in the corner of his mouth.

“Hey,” Jack said casually, leaning in just close enough for his voice to carry. “You got a smoke? Haven’t had one all morning, and I’m starting to think the good Lord’s testing me.” His tone was relaxed, soft like velvet draped over steel, his eyes just shy of playful. The man grunted, his lips curling into something closer to a sneer than a smile. His eyes were small and mean, measuring Jack like you’d measure the weight of a knife.

“You a kid or something?” the brute spat, his voice thick with suspicion. “Who the hell are you?”

Jack’s grin widened, but it was all mask. “Kid? You wound me, mate. I’m practically an old man compared to half these parishioners. Just thought a fellow sinner might share a little fire for my lungs. Nothing suspicious about nicotine cravings, eh?”

The man didn’t bite. He shifted his stance, one hand brushing his coat where Jack could tell a weapon rested. The tension in the air coiled tighter, a string drawn to the edge of snapping. Jack tilted his head, his smile frozen in place, but his eyes flicked with sharp calculation.

“You know,” Jack murmured, voice dipping low, “you’ve got the kind of face that says you’re not here for prayer.”

The brute's eyes narrowed, his patience evaporating. "You're starting to sound like trouble." He stepped back, his weight sliding into the posture of a man ready to fight. The last shreds of civility in Jack burned up with the incense smoke. His own patience snapped.

"Trouble's my middle name," Jack muttered. His fist shot forward, slamming into the man's gut with a force that knocked the wind out of him. The man's body folded, wheezing, but before he could recover, Jack followed it with a quick, sharp punch to the jaw. Bone cracked beneath knuckles; the brute stumbled back with a growl that was half pain, half fury. His hand went to his coat, dragging out a pistol with trembling rage.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" he roared, his voice cutting through the prayers inside, startling those near the doors. Heads turned, whispers burst into shrieks, and the atmosphere of reverence shattered like glass.

But it was too late for him. Jack had already lunged, a kick snapping the gun from his hand, sending it clattering across the stone steps. The man cursed, spittle flying, but Jack didn't give him a chance to recover, shoving him back into the wall of the church.

The commotion outside spread like fire through dry straw. People preparing for mass gasped and cried out, panic swelling in the courtyard. Mothers clutched their children, men pulled wives toward the gates, their footsteps frantic against the cobblestones. Fear licked across the crowd as Jack's fists traded blows with the soldier, a chaotic scene painting itself in real time on the steps of holy ground.

Jack knew he needed help. His chest burned, not from the fight but from the weight of too many eyes on him, too many unknowns about how many Circle soldiers were watching. He could already see movement in the crowd—others shifting, watching, maybe moving closer. Outnumbered, cut off, exposed. His heart pounded as he ducked another swing, his hand fumbling for the small communicator tucked into his sleeve.

"Harleena!" he hissed into it, his voice tight, laced with urgency. "I need help. I'm in trouble."

The soldier clawed at him, spitting curses, their struggle kicking up dust and sending hymn books scattering to the ground as the nearby churchgoers fled. The mass dissolved into chaos, pews abandoned, whispers turning to panicked cries. The bells above tolled, not for prayer, but as if mocking the violence breaking loose below. Jack slammed his shoulder into the brute, teeth gritted. He could feel more shadows moving in—more soldiers drawn to the sound of the fight. He was outnumbered, and he knew it. Harleena's help couldn't come soon enough.

The fight Jack had picked quickly escalated beyond his control. In no time, the first brute had called his friends, and suddenly Jack was hemmed in, surrounded by three powerful men, all clearly from the Ember Circle. Their boots pounded against the stone as they closed in, their faces set in grim determination, their eyes flat and merciless. They weren't here to scuffle, to push him around, or even to make a point—they were here to kill. Jack's grin faltered for the first time, his hand tightening into a fist as he adjusted his footing, but deep down he knew it—this was bad. The odds weren't just stacked against him; they were pressing down like a collapsing wall.

The first soldier lunged, swinging the butt of his rifle toward Jack's head. Jack ducked, but not fast enough; the iron cracked across his temple, sending stars bursting across his vision. He staggered, catching himself only to receive a boot to his ribs from the second soldier, the air tearing from his lungs in a painful wheeze. He hit the steps hard, his knuckles scraping on the cold stone as he rolled back to his feet. Blood dripped warm and sticky down his cheek.

“Thought you were clever, didn’t you?” one of them snarled, circling him like a wolf testing a tired stag. “Thought you could come into our house, throw a few punches, and walk away?” The man’s smile was cruel.

Jack spat blood, straightened, and forced his lips into a crooked smirk. “Walk away? Mate, I was planning to skip.” He lunged at him, landing a punch to the jaw, but before he could follow it up, another arm snaked around his throat, choking the air from him. He clawed at it, his vision swimming, knees buckling as the brute lifted him off the ground like a ragdoll.

Just as the edges of his sight turned black, the sharp clatter of combat boots broke through the chaos. Harleena burst through a side door, her voice sharp and furious. “Jack, what the hell did you get yourself into this time?!”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Her dog shot forward at her whistle, leaping at one of the soldiers, sinking teeth into his leg with a guttural growl. The man cried out, trying to shake the beast off, and Harleena was already there, fists flying. She landed a vicious hook across his jaw, then a knee to his stomach, her movements crisp, merciless. For a brief, flickering moment, Jack’s chances had just improved.

But it wasn’t enough. The man choking Jack slammed him into the stone wall, the back of his skull exploding with pain. Jack gasped, his smirk long gone, his lungs burning as the world narrowed to the iron grip at his throat. Harleena was holding her own, trading blows with her target, but the third soldier was closing in on her fast, a knife gleaming in his hand. Jack’s stomach twisted. They were drowning.

Jack’s mind raced. Every beat of his heart screamed that they were outmatched. And then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glint—an object inside his coat. The trinket he had swiped from Trickerium’s house, one of the old man’s strange bottled spells. He hadn’t touched it since, hadn’t dared, but desperation is a cruel motivator.

“Alright, let’s gamble,” he rasped, his voice raw.

With his free hand, Jack yanked the bottle from his jacket and ripped the cap off with his teeth. A thick, acrid vapor burst free, coiling in the air like a living storm. The Circle soldiers froze for half a second, confusion crossing their faces, but Jack felt it immediately—something surging inside him, sharp and wild, like a wire pulled too tight. His muscles locked, his teeth ached with the charge, and his veins hummed with raw energy.

Instinct took over. Jack thrust out a hand, finger pointed at the soldier in front of him. A jagged bolt of lightning erupted, white-blue and crackling, tearing through the air and slamming into the man’s chest. The smell of ozone and burning cloth filled the courtyard as the soldier screamed, then collapsed in a twitching heap.

Harleena’s eyes widened, her fight momentarily forgotten as she stared. “Jack… what the—”

“Later!” Jack shouted, exhilaration bleeding into his voice. His chest rose and fell with rapid, ecstatic breaths. The feeling was intoxicating, terrifying. He swung his hand toward the second soldier. Another bolt, sharper, hotter, ripped from his fingertip and struck true. The man dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, his weapon clattering harmlessly across the stones.

But the power didn’t stop. Jack felt it coiling, growing, pressure building under his skin like he might explode if he didn’t release it. His heart thundered, his fingers shook, and with a wild laugh that sounded too close to madness, he turned and pointed at the stone wall beside him. The bolt blasted out, splitting the air, striking the wall with a thunderous crack. Cracks spidered across the ancient stone, dust raining down, the whole church shuddering with the impact.

The remaining soldier, already battered by Harleena's strikes and the snapping jaws of her dog, stumbled back in horror, his eyes wide at the chaos. Harleena darted in, slamming her fist across his jaw, sending him sprawling unconscious onto the ground.

She whirled to Jack, breathless, her chest heaving as she took in the carnage. Her eyes were wide, astonished, but sharp with suspicion. "What was that?!" she demanded, voice caught between disbelief and admiration.

Jack, still panting, his veins buzzing with the fading echo of electricity, let his lips curl into that crooked grin again. "Stole it from the old man's house," he said, his tone infuriatingly casual for someone who had just nearly been killed. He shook his hand out like it still tingled with the storm. "Had no idea what it did, but—" his grin widened, wicked—"damn, I love magic."

Harleena raised an eyebrow, brushing dust from her arm, her gaze flicking to the unconscious bodies, the shattered stone, then back to him. "Now I think I understand Harry's fascination with magic," she muttered under her breath, her voice low and edged with awe. Her dog growled at the twitching soldier on the ground, the smell of singed flesh still thick in the air.

The fight was over, but Jack's chest still thrummed with the ghost of lightning, and in his eyes, a dangerous glint lingered—like maybe this magic was too much, even for him.

As the battle began to settle, Harleena moved quickly, her boots crunching over broken stone and shattered glass, crouching low beside the fallen soldiers. Her hands, deft and precise, rifled through their pockets, pulling out knives, coins, and scraps of paper, her eyes sharp as she searched for anything useful. Her breath was still ragged from the fight, but her focus was unshaken. Jack, meanwhile, was restless, the last echoes of magic still buzzing in his veins, leaving him jittery with a wild, uncontrollable energy. He paced toward the church doors, each step sharp and hurried, his hand tightening around the bottle now drained of its vapor. He was already planning his next move, his next strike. They weren't done yet—not until Rabbit was back with them, safe.

But just as he slipped into the shadowed archway of the church, Harleena's voice cut through the chaos like a blade. "Jack!" she called, her tone brittle, on the edge of breaking. It wasn't the tone of someone finding coin or contraband—it was horror, raw and unmistakable.

Jack froze. His body reacted before his mind could catch up, his head snapping around, his heartbeat suddenly louder than the echoes of prayer and panic still drifting through the building. He saw her standing over one of the unconscious soldiers, her face drained of color, her hand trembling as she lifted something into view.

At first, Jack's mind refused to process it. It was just another trinket, another scrap of loot. But then he saw it. The dull gleam, the familiar weight in her palm. His stomach dropped into a cold pit.

The Umbral Ring.

The world seemed to stop. Every sound—the rustle of robes inside, the distant cries of scattering civilians, the faint groan of an injured soldier—fell away into silence. All Jack could hear was the sickening thud of his own heart, beating faster, harder. The ring—their ring, Rabbit's ring—was in Harleena's hand, not his.

She stared at it, her expression locked in shock, her lips parting as if the words could barely find their way out. "These are Rabbit's things," she whispered, voice trembling. She held up more: Rabbit's knife, his pouch of tools, even his familiar scrap of cloth, worn from years of use. But

the centerpiece, gleaming faintly in the dim light, was the Umbral Ring. “Jack… he didn’t have it. They did.”

Jack felt his blood run cold, the grin he had worn moments ago dissolving into grim realization. “No…” His voice cracked low, almost swallowed by the weight pressing down on him. He stepped closer, his eyes darting between Harleena’s stricken face and the ring in her palm. “That means—they had Rabbit. They took it from him. We were one breath away from—”

Harleena’s eyes hardened, the horror in her gaze mixing with fury. “From losing it forever,” she finished, her voice sharp as broken glass. Her knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip around the artifact, as though afraid it might slip back into enemy hands if she loosened for even a second. “If they had taken this back to their leaders… if the Circle had this, Jack—Doskvol wouldn’t stand a chance. None of us would.”

Jack swallowed hard, the weight of it sinking in like chains around his chest. For all the bravado, for all his recklessness, this was a sobering, brutal truth—they hadn’t just risked their lives today. They had risked everything. And they hadn’t even realized it until it was almost too late.

“Rabbit’s down,” Harleena muttered, her tone low and venomous, the fury in her voice barely masking the fear underneath. “How could they—how could they get him?”

Jack raked a hand through his hair, his pulse still hammering. “We can’t think about that now. We need to get it back to him, but first…” He glanced at the unconscious soldiers, at the chaos around them, at the church where shadows still moved inside. His eyes narrowed. “First, we finish this. Then we find Rabbit. Then we regroup.” His words carried no smugness now, no grin, no swagger—only resolve.

Harleena met his gaze, the fire in her eyes matching his. “Agreed. But after this… we don’t let him out of our sight again. Not with this,” she said, her hand tightening around the Umbral Ring, her voice lowering to a growl. “Never again.”

The two stood in the aftermath of the storm, bodies twitching on the ground around them, the smell of ozone still thick in the air. The realization hung over them heavier than the smoke. They had almost lost the one thing they could never afford to lose. And now, the battle at Assumption was no longer just about territory or vengeance—it had become about survival, about keeping that artifact out of the hands of the Circle, no matter the cost.

Back with Harry and Boquinha. The tension in the air was thick as Harry and Boquinha waited by the door. The corridor smelled of damp stone and old incense, a chill creeping up from the flagstones into Harry’s boots while a halo of candlelight from some unseen shrine pulsed dimly against the corrugated metal. Boquinha’s impatience was palpable. She kept pacing in front of the locked metal door, casting occasional glances at Harry, her eyes filled with barely concealed frustration. The little heels of her scuffed shoes clicked and skittered like an anxious metronome; each pass she made seemed tighter, smaller, like a coil tightening. She demanded, more forcefully each time, that Harry open the door, her tone a mix of authority and annoyance. “No more waiting, Harry. Open the damn door now,” she said, her voice dripping with venom. The word “damn” didn’t sit right in a child’s mouth; it sounded borrowed, practiced, something she’d learned to throw like a stone. Harry, ever the loyal member of the Crows, held firm, his gaze steady and unwavering. He kept his breathing even, let his shoulders stay relaxed, and let the cool press of the Umbral Rod against his ribs remind him of where his line in the sand was drawn. "Not until Harleena comes back," he said calmly, his voice betraying no hint of fear despite the pressure Boquinha was putting on him. The reply rang simple and iron-solid in the narrow hall; it steadied him as much as it defied her.

Boquinha's patience snapped. Harry watched the change roll across her face like a shadow passing a window—first the pout, then the flattening of the lips, then the eyes, bright and glass-sweet, becoming knives. She stepped closer, her eyes narrowing dangerously. In a swift motion, she pulled a gleaming knife from her belt and pointed it directly at Harry, her act of innocence completely discarded. The blade caught the meager light and sketched a thin, wicked star in the air between them. "I said open it, now!" she hissed, her voice low and threatening. The thing in her tone made Harry think of basement doors and traps that don't look like traps until you're already inside. Harry's eyes flickered, his suspicion now confirmed. She had been pretending this whole time. What had once seemed like an innocent girl, asking for help, now revealed herself as something far more dangerous. The air around them seemed to grow heavier, and Harry remained calm, keeping his distance. He could feel the Rod hum against his side—no, not fear, recognition, a readiness, as if some smooth, ancient mechanism had just slotted into place. Without warning, Harry made his move. With a flick of his wrist, he cast a quick spell and vanished into thin air. The world tilted cold, then righted; sound flattened, his outline thinning into the quiver of heat one sees above a brazier. He moved silently, slipping behind Boquinha and observing her reaction from the shadows. Her head snapped, knife carving a quick arc through the empty space he'd just vacated. Boquinha paused for a moment, her expression one of confusion. She turned, slashing through the air with her knife, trying to catch the invisible form of Harry. "What the hell?!" she muttered, her voice sharp. "Where did you go, Harry?" Harry stayed completely still, barely breathing, watching her every move. He could see her reflected in the brushed metal of the door—small, narrow shoulders, grip perfect on the hilt, stance all wrong for a child and exactly right for a knife fighter.

It didn't take long for her to come to a conclusion. "Are you coming or not?" she muttered aloud, her voice barely a whisper. "I have him!" Harry's heart skipped a beat. Boquinha wasn't talking to herself; she was communicating with someone. She turned her head upward, and Harry's eyes narrowed as a crow swooped down from the trees, landing next to her. The bird struck the flagstones with a prim little hop, black feathers oiled to a blue sheen, head cocked at an angle too knowing by half. Harry didn't need to be told who it was. The bird's familiar black feathers and piercing eyes could only belong to one creature—Silas Thorn's pet, the cypher agent's companion. The connection between them, the rumored mental link, made it clear that Boquinha wasn't working alone. "Get your ass down here now, Silas!" Boquinha said, her voice cool and composed. "He's really here, I knew it wasn't just rumors. He's ours now." The crow gave a harsh, smug croak that sounded uncomfortably like agreement. Harry stood frozen for a moment, piecing together what was happening. Silas Thorn—the same cypher agent who had worked with the Crows in the past—was involved in this mission. He hadn't been expecting this twist, but now everything started to fall into place. The Cyphers weren't just neutral bystanders in this mess; they had their own agenda. He felt the prickle of being triangulated—Boquinha in front, a watcher above, and somewhere close, a man he half trusted and half feared.

As Harry watched, Boquinha calmly bent down to work on the lock. The knife vanished; a thin pick winked between her fingers like a splinter of moon. Her nimble fingers worked with precision, and in seconds, the door creaked open. Tumblers clicked in a neat, rising scale; grease-sticky hinges complained under her small strength. She stepped inside, and Harry, still invisible, followed closely behind. The breath of the room washed over him—stale antiseptic, old sweat, something burnt and bitter—while the crow hopped across the threshold like a priest of bad omens, and Harry slid after them both, a shadow within a shadow, all senses narrowed to the blade-thin edge where the next decision would cut.

As Harry followed Boquinha in, he noticed movement at the edge of his vision—three small mechanical spiders, each no bigger than a tennis ball, skittering past his boots with a faint chitter of brass feet and the whisper of clockwork springs. Their matte plates blinked with pinprick lenses, a stutter of blue-green as they negotiated the baseboard and split like scouts taking corners. The hallmark of the Cyphers—Lannic's nasty little creepers—each one a pocket

of genius and malice bound in screws and lacquer. Harry felt his gut go cold. He remembered, with a clarity that tasted metallic, the last time he had let curiosity win: that cave-stale air, that crate of sleeping spiders inside the loot from the Deadland Express, the way one had sprung awake with a tidy, cheerful click as if eager to chew his face off. He remembered Jack's laugh—"Don't poke it, scholar, it'll poke back"—and Harleena's hand jerking him backward a half heartbeat before it bit. They'd almost died that day. Seeing the spiders here again, in this room, felt like a circle he didn't want closed. The room beyond the door shocked him. The light was thin and dirty, pooled from a single humming bulb and a slit of stained glass that smeared the air with saintly green, and in that bruised illumination a makeshift hospital had been arranged with the pragmatism of criminals who expected their patients to be alive enough to talk. On the bed lay Emberwing. Not the ghost they had imagined, not the ash-smeared rumor their minds had made to sleep at night, but the man himself: wrapped in browned bandages that stuck to charred flesh, face a ruined map of blister and graft, one leg gone below the knee with the stump bound tight and propped on folded towels. Tubing fed him bitter-smelling fluids; a cracked enamel basin waited on a chair, mottled with cooling blood. Despite the wreck of him, his voice filled the room with a hateful authority that made Harry's shoulders bristle. "Where the hell is everyone?" he barked, hoarse but commanding, as if volume alone could force his body to obey. "What's going on out there?!" The air around him felt hotter with every syllable, like his fury could re-ignite what the blast had failed to finish. Boquinha took a slow, careful step toward the bed, all softness gone from her face. The light found her and clung to her like she invited it; Harry saw the flicker of recognition twist across Emberwing's features, the burnt lips curling back from his teeth. "You," Emberwing spat, venom stringing his voice into something almost gleeful. "I should've known. You... filthy little brat." The word "brat" landed like a knife hurled from a balcony—petty, precise, meant to mark. Boquinha didn't flinch. "Do you have any idea what's going to happen to you now, Emberwing?" she asked, her voice cool as river stone, her posture impossibly composed for a child, hands loose at her sides as if this were a conversation in a schoolyard rather than a verdict delivered at bedside. She looked at him the way a lock looks at its keyhole—expectant, patient, resigned to the inevitable. Before Emberwing could spit another insult, a second figure unglued itself from the shadow at the far corner and stepped into the low light: Silas Thorn. He looked like a man pulled taut on a wire—jaw clenched, eyes blazing, that lean Cypher frame gone rigid with a fury that had been stored and sharpened for too long. Harry felt his invisible skin buzz at the sight of him; grief and steel in one man's face. Silas didn't speak at first. He just looked at Emberwing the way a blade looks at a throat, and the room tilted, quietly, toward reckoning. Emberwing's hatred boiled up again, a fresh surge that made the bed creak under him as he strained against pain and dressing. "Silas Thorn? You?" he snarled, voice tearing itself raw to sound bigger than his ruined lung could carry. "You're really here to finish this, huh? You think I'm just gonna die like this? Idiots, all of you!"

"I'm not just here to finish you, Emberwing," Silas growled, every syllable dragged through the jagged edge of his grief. His voice trembled with the weight of restraint, a man holding his fury back by the thinnest of threads. His fists tightened, knuckles pale and trembling as he spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm here to make sure you never hurt anyone again." His jaw locked, his whole body rigid with the effort of containing the storm inside. "My friend, Adrian Blackwood... you killed him. Sold him to Pennwright like he was nothing, a pawn to parade in some grotesque display. You stripped him of dignity and life, and I had to stand there in the wreckage of what you set into motion. And now, I'm going to make you pay for that. You're going to die today, Emberwing. You and your boss—your whole rotten Circle—are going to choke on what you've sown."

Emberwing let out a bark of laughter, sharp and broken, like glass grinding against stone. His body shook with it, the bandages pulling at burned skin, his breath hitching in a painful rasp, but his sneer never wavered. "You think I'm afraid of you?" His voice was a gnarled branch, splintered but not broken. "After everything I've survived, after the fire and the ashes you left me in, you think a rat like you can end me? You can't kill me, Thorn. You can't even touch me. I'll

spit blood in your face before I beg for mercy. I'll make sure you regret the day you even whispered my name."

Harry stepped forward then, his form shimmering before solidifying, the invisibility spell sloughing off him like water sliding from glass. He knew the moment he revealed himself the room would tip into chaos, but he couldn't remain silent any longer. Boquinha's head snapped toward him, her eyes flashing wide, surprise flickering across her carefully composed mask. For a fraction of a heartbeat she looked like the child she pretended to be—caught off guard, vulnerable—then it was gone, her gaze sharpening into something harder, colder.

Silas was faster. In a blink, his gun was up, barrel leveled at Harry's chest. The weight of the room seemed to drop, the faint mechanical whir of the Cypher spiders in the corners like a deathwatch. Harry froze but didn't flinch. He raised his hands slowly, palms open, his voice calm, steady, controlled. "Don't shoot," he said, each word like a measured step over thin ice. "I'm not here to fight you."

Silas's eyes narrowed, suspicion crackling in them like static, his finger hovering on the trigger. He didn't lower the weapon, but something in Harry's tone stalled him—if only for a moment. Boquinha tilted her head slightly, studying Harry with a predator's patience, as though she were measuring his usefulness rather than his threat.

Emberwing's reaction was nothing but venom. His lips curled back over broken teeth, his breath wheezing in short bursts, each word spat with loathing. "You think I care who you are, kid?" he rasped, voice dripping with contempt. "Insects. All of you are the same. Scurrying, scratching, pretending you matter. You're already dead, you just don't know it yet."

Harry smirked, though inside his chest his nerves knotted tight, thrumming with rage and the echo of every scar Emberwing had left behind. His face hardened, the warmth drained from his features until he was carved from cold stone. "I don't care if you remember me, Emberwing," he said, voice low and deliberate, each word sharpened into a blade. "But you're going to hear me loud and clear now. The game is over. You lost."

Beneath that calm, Harry's thoughts churned, the memories rushing up unbidden—the cries of the orphans, the smoldering rubble of the orphanage, the lifeless faces pulled from the fire. He could smell the char, taste the iron tang of blood in the air again, feel the phantom heat of that terrible night. His grip on control trembled, but his voice did not falter.

"I hope you believe in God, Emberwing," Harry said, his tone calm but heavy with the weight of finality. "And I hope your god is a forgiving one. Because he's your last chance. I will never forgive you for what you've done."

Emberwing's eyes burned with molten hate as he thrashed weakly against the sheets, his ruined body still trying to rise, still defying the weight of his own brokenness. "Crows," he spat again, the word dripping with venom like poison off a fang. His lips curled back in a snarl, and with a sudden jerk of his neck, he spat once more—this time the glob of blood and bile landed squarely on Harry's shoulder. The warmth of it seeped through the fabric, sticky and vile. "You're all going to die too," Emberwing hissed, his voice raw, guttural, a curse meant to outlive him.

Harry froze for a heartbeat, then grinned, the sharp twist of his mouth masking the storm inside. His eyes flashed with something harder than fear—determination, defiance, maybe even rage. "That's where you're wrong," he said, voice low and final. Before his own thoughts could catch up to his body, his hand moved. Reflex, instinct, pure reaction. He pulled his gun free, the weight of it heavy and solid in his palm, and leveled it squarely at Emberwing's forehead. The world narrowed to that single moment, the cold line of sight, the breath caught in his lungs. Then he squeezed the trigger.

The deafening crack split the room apart, rattling the walls like a violent prayer. Emberwing's body jerked back, a sharp convulsion, before collapsing against the bed. His head lolled, his mouth still frozen in a hateful snarl as the life drained from his eyes. Silence followed, a silence heavy enough to crush the air from the room. Smoke curled lazily from the barrel of Harry's gun, the acrid bite of gunpowder mixing with the sharp tang of blood and antiseptic.

Harry stood there, staring at the body, the reality of it slamming into him like a brick to the chest. His heart thundered, each beat a hammer inside his ribs, adrenaline screaming through his veins until his hands shook. His throat tightened, dry and aching. He had done it—his first kill. Not an accident in a crowd, not a distant casualty of battle, but deliberate, intimate, a single pull of the trigger that ended a man's life. It had happened so quickly, too quickly. No time to think, no space to hesitate. It was already done.

There was no turning back. The line had been crossed, and the world felt heavier for it. Yet beneath the weight of that act, a single truth stood clear: the job was done. This church, this ground—this territory would no longer belong to the Ember Circle. It was theirs now, won with blood.

Silas and Boquinha exchanged a look, both caught off guard by the sudden violence. Silas's jaw tightened, his expression carved from stone, while Boquinha's face remained eerily calm, her bright eyes gleaming with that unnatural composure she wore like a mask. She broke the silence first, her voice light, almost dismissive. "Well," she said coolly, her tone cutting through the heavy air, "that still achieves our goals, so it's fine by me." She gave a small shrug, as if Harry's gunshot was nothing more than a minor detail in a larger scheme, as if death itself were a casual inconvenience.

Silas's face darkened at her nonchalance. He stepped forward suddenly, grabbing Boquinha by the arms with a force that made her stumble. His grip was iron, his voice a low growl edged with fury. "Don't play games with me, kid. Your innocent act never worked with us Cyphers. Not once. I've been watching you since day one, keeping you from making messes bigger than you could crawl out of. And I'm done pretending." His eyes bore into hers, sharp and cold, his whole body trembling with restrained anger. "Now tell me where they are."

Boquinha didn't flinch. Her lips curled into the faintest smile, her gaze steady, a challenge glinting in her bright eyes. For a moment, the silence stretched, taut and dangerous, as though she might refuse outright. But then she exhaled slowly, her shoulders loosening just slightly, her voice dropping into a smooth cadence that was far too old for her years. "You already knew where they were, if you thought about it for a minute," she said, sly and deliberate, her words dripping with smugness. She tilted her head, watching Silas with the air of someone who enjoyed holding the upper hand, if only for a breath.

"Fine," she continued, almost lazily, as if bestowing a gift. "Our group is kinda everywhere right now, ever since the attack at the base. Scattered, hiding, regrouping. But those two..." she lifted a small hand and gestured vaguely toward the distance, "are being taken care of by Jackie Comber of the Unseen. Deadlands hideout."

The name hung in the air like smoke, heavy with implication. The room seemed to grow colder at the mention of it, and even Harry felt the shift, the weight of what had just been revealed pressing down on him.

Silas's face hardened as the truth settled into him, the sharp lines of his jaw tightening, his eyes narrowing with grim recognition. He knew exactly what that meant, every implication written across his expression like a shadow he could not shake. The weight of it pressed him down for only a moment before he turned on his heel abruptly, his cloak swirling as he strode toward the

door. For Silas, the conversation was finished. He had no interest in explaining himself, not here, not now. He moved like a man burdened with purpose, not hesitation.

But Harry couldn't let it go. His mind was buzzing, every nerve firing questions faster than his mouth could form them. "What were you two talking about?" he called after Silas, his voice edged with suspicion and curiosity. "Who is he after?" His tone carried more than casual inquiry—it carried the sharp bite of a man who had just stepped into a game whose rules were hidden from him, and he was demanding the first glimpse of the cards.

Boquinha had paused mid-step, her small frame caught in the half-light of the room. Slowly, she turned back toward him, her gaze dragging over him in deliberate calculation. Her bright eyes, so deceptively childish at first glance, now flickered with something older, something sharp. She studied him like she might weigh a coin in her palm, deciding whether to spend it or tuck it away for later. The silence stretched out, heavy and uncomfortable, before she finally spoke, her tone lower, more serious, the innocence in her cadence tempered by something colder.

"He was looking for the Blackwood twins," she said, each word deliberate, carrying a weight that landed hard in Harry's chest. "They're the kids of Adrian Blackwood. Silas thinks it's his responsibility to take care of them, after he couldn't do anything but watch his friend die at the Black Marrow." Her eyes glittered with the hint of something almost mocking, though her face stayed perfectly smooth. "I'm sure you know that story, right? Rumors say the Crows were there too."

Harry's lips pressed into a thin line, his mind churning as fragments of memory and whispers of the past collided. He didn't flinch, though, didn't let her see how much that name or that night rang in his skull like a bell. "There sure are a lot of rumors in Doskvol," he muttered, his voice low, dismissive, but not without edge. His words were a shield, an attempt to throw her probing back into the mist.

Boquinha's mouth curved into a slight smile, subtle but unmistakably sly. The look was unsettling on her small face—part child, part serpent, a play of innocence twisted by experience. "Good luck, kid," she said casually, the word "kid" landing heavier than it should have, like she was the elder in the exchange. "You guys did a good job today. Take the area, if you must. Ulric doesn't want it back." Her shrug was so light it was almost dismissive, as if territorial wars and bloodshed were nothing but scraps on a map to her.

She turned to leave, her figure already fading into the shadows pooling at the edges of the room. Harry's voice came after her, firm, insistent. "We need your help to leave safely."

For the first time, her composure cracked just enough for something sharper to show through. She turned her head, just enough to glance at him over her shoulder. The smile she gave him was knowing, chilling in its sweetness, the kind of smile a child might give when caught in a lie but choosing not to care. "Goodbye, Harry."

And with that, she slipped out, her small frame swallowed by the dark corridors of the church, leaving only questions and unease in her wake.

Harry lingered for a moment, the weight of her words pressing down on him, his mind already trying to piece together what this meant, what the Blackwood twins had to do with any of it, and why Silas Thorn was playing this game in the shadows. He felt the burn of the revelation settle deep in his bones, a reminder that every answer in Doskvol only opened three new doors of doubt.

Pushing those thoughts aside with effort, he straightened his shoulders and turned back into the church, footsteps steady despite the storm in his head. Inside, relief hit him in waves at the sight

before him—Jack crouched low, pulling Rabbit Foot out from the shadows, his hands steady as he helped their comrade to his feet. Rabbit's face was pale, his body slumped from the blow that had taken him down, but his chest rose with shallow breaths. He was alive.

"Easy there, Rabbit," Jack muttered, voice rough with relief as he braced his friend's weight against him. "I've got you. You're not done yet."

Harry approached, his gaze flicking over the two of them, his throat tight as the tension of the last hours began to settle. Rabbit's eyelids fluttered open, groggy, confusion clouding his features as he blinked back into consciousness. And in that fragile moment, Harry realized just how close they had come—closer than any of them had realized.

Harleena, ever the pragmatist, handed Rabbit back his belongings, the chain of the Umbral Ring whispering over her knuckles before it settled into his palm with a weight that felt like a heartbeat. "Take better care of these next time, Rabbit," she said, a slight smirk cutting through the soot and sweat on her face, though her eyes were still sharp from the fight. Rabbit looked at his items with a sigh that pulled at his ribs. "I will," he grumbled, rubbing the tender welt at his temple where the blow had landed, thumb coming away gritty with dust and a smear of dried blood. Jack stepped into the middle of them like he was stepping into the eye of a storm, voice low and decisive. "Alright, time to wrap this up. We need to get out of here, but we're taking one of those soldiers with us," he said, already scanning the sprawl of unconscious men for the one still breathing steady. "We need answers, and I want to know where Father Tom is." The name hung in the nave like incense. Rabbit nodded once, jaw tightening. "Good plan. But I'm staying behind," he added, raising a hand before anyone could argue. "I've already been attacked today. I'll blend in as one of the attendees. I'll keep control of the story, make sure the Crows don't get the full blame for this mess." He was already slipping into the posture—the slight slump, the penitent's shuffle, the way to look past the blood and broken pews as if they were some other parish's problems. Harleena cut him a look as sharp as broken glass but didn't protest. "Fine. Just make sure we're not blamed for anything else," she said, and there was the quiet warning in it that always made men twice Rabbit's size shut their mouths. They moved fast, because the air was starting to thicken with voices—frightened whispers, the rustle of skirts, a door banging somewhere deeper in the church. Jack and Harry hauled a conscious survivor to his feet, a broad-shouldered brute whose bravado had bled out with the color in his cheeks; Harleena bound his wrists with a length of torn cassock and stuffed a linen rag between his teeth to kill the urge to announce himself to every armed friend within earshot. The soldier's eyes flicked between them, fury wobbling into fear when Jack leaned close and murmured, "Blink wrong and you limp home without a tongue." The man didn't blink at all after that. They cut a path along the side aisle, past scattered hymnals stamped with muddy boot prints, past a cracked stretch of stone still warm from lightning where Jack's bolt had spidered the wall. The incense clung sweet and stale to the back of their throats; candle smoke smeared the stained glass into bruised colors that dragged across their faces as they moved. Rabbit paused by a column, rolling his shoulders like a man shaking the fight out of his bones, then stooped to pick up a discarded prayer book and tuck it under his arm. "Misunderstanding," he muttered, rehearsing the lie and tasting its shape. "Wrong men, wrong place, scuffle by the doors—panic does the rest." He straightened the collar of a borrowed coat, dabbed at his brow to smudge the blood into something less alarming, and put on the patient half-smile of a man who had seen worse in peacetime. "Go," he said without looking back. "I'll chant for you." "Chant quiet," Jack shot over his shoulder, already shepherding their captive toward a side exit. Harleena ghosted the rear, blade low, eyes sweeping for movement, the dog at her heel giving a silent, teeth-bared growl at anyone who dared glance twice. Harry kept his grip firm on the prisoner's arm, the adrenaline ebbing into a tremor he swallowed with bile and breath; Emberwing's last twitch kept flashing behind his eyes like a lantern guttering in wind. They slipped through a service door into a narrow stone passage that stank of damp wood and wax, feet thudding soft over grit and fallen plaster, then out into the side yard where the evening had finally surrendered

to night. The cool air hit their faces, blessed and sharp, carrying the distant echo of bells and the muffled churn of a city already digesting the latest rumor. They didn't speak as they crossed the shadowed margin of the church grounds, just the scuff of boots, the prisoner's ragged breathing, the clink of the ring's chain against Rabbit's chest as he turned back toward the nave and vanished into the slow-moving tide of parishioners. Outside the walls, Doskvol stretched its dark arteries toward the river, lamps shivering to life, alley cats staking claims, and the fog laying its wet palms over everything. Jack, Harry, and Harleena paused only long enough to trade a look that said more than any oath—exhaustion, relief, the steel of what came next—then tugged their captive into the deeper dark where answers could be coaxed without witnesses or saints. It was over for now, but every step whispered that this wasn't the last of what the Ember Circle had in store. The weight of the day settled across their shoulders like a damp cloak: the near-loss of the Ring, the blood on the tiles, the way the church still hummed with fear. Yet beneath it, another current moved—quieter, colder, certain. They had taken ground. Assumption's shadow now bent toward them. Territory, leverage, a foothold clawed back from fire and lies. The Crows were gaining power, and as the night wrapped the city in its wet, unblinking stare, they walked on with the firm, unlovely knowledge that they wouldn't stop until Doskvol was theirs.

Story: **Lord Veylock and Morten Discuss the News**

The study in Lord Veylock's estate was quiet, the shadows in the room stretching long as the fire flickered low. Morten sat with the latest edition of the Blade Chronicle, the weight of the news settling over him like a storm cloud. He shook his head, half-amused, half-concerned, before tossing the paper onto the table. He glanced up at his master.

Morten:
"Veylock, have you seen this? The Assumption Church attacked, and now the Ember Circle linked to it? Makes you wonder how deep their roots really go in this city. And the Crows—well, they're in the thick of it now, aren't they?"

Lord Veylock looked up from his glass, his usual poise betraying an edge of concern. The events unfolding in Doskvol had caught his attention, particularly the growing influence of the Crows and the startling revelations about the Ember Circle. He took a slow sip from his drink before setting it down with a deliberate calm.

Lord Veylock:
"I've seen it. It's... hardly surprising, Morten. The Ember Circle, hiding in plain sight at Assumption Church? Bold, even by their standards. And if this comes to light, if it's confirmed, it will rattle the city. The news could tear through Doskvol like wildfire—'a criminal faction running a religious institution'—do you see the implications of that?"

Morten leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. The idea was unsettling, but the bigger picture was becoming clearer with every word he read.

Morten:
"Aye, and it's strange, isn't it? Even with all this violence, the Crows—'trying to protect civilians'—are being seen as the lesser evil. A witness says, 'Even if the Crows were involved, I saw one of them—maybe more—standing between the fighting and the people. They were trying to protect the civilians.' Funny, that."

Lord Veylock:
"It's curious indeed. The Crows, protecting the innocent? It makes one wonder if they're trying to brand themselves as something else—maybe they want to make sure they're seen as the saviors of Doskvol, not just the troublemakers. But you're right, Morten. That's the game they're playing. There's a fine line between villain and hero in Doskvol, and they know it. But it's their alliance with the Skarrenfolk that I worry about—Elara Voss vouching for them. That's no small thing."

Morten's eyes flickered to the fire. He wasn't too concerned about the Crows, or the Ember Circle, for that matter. His thoughts were more focused on the future—on what was about to happen in Doskvol.

Morten:
"I don't see why you're so worried about the Crows. They're a problem, sure, but a manageable one. The real issue, Veylock, is the rising star of Captain Morian Ishtar. He's already made a name for himself in the Imperial Police, hasn't he? A man like that, with the backing of the Espiritas and the military, he could clean up this city. He could rid us of all these gangs. Maybe it's exactly what Doskvol needs."

Lord Veylock
"And that, Morten, is exactly what concerns me."

Lord Veylock's voice had a darker edge as he leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

Lord Veylock:
"I've been watching Captain Ishtar's rise with more than a little unease. Don't misunderstand me—I see the appeal of a man who can bring order, but what's his real goal? If he wins the governorship, he could make life very difficult for everyone in our circle. The man's got a reputation for efficiency and ruthlessness. His work with the Imperial Police and his involvement in Merrow Valesque's arrest made him a hero in the eyes of the public. He's a clean slate, and Doskvol loves a clean slate. But do you really think he'll stop at ridding the city of the Ember Circle and the Crows? No. He'll go further."

Morten shook his head, unconcerned.

Morten:
"You're overthinking it, Veylock. If he can clean up the city, what's the problem? Things are getting worse by the week. Gangs are at each other's throats, and Daava has done nothing but make backroom deals with the criminal underworld. We need someone who can step up. It doesn't have to be so complicated."

Lord Veylock:
"Oh, it's very complicated, Morten. You think Morian Ishtar will stop at cleaning up the streets? No, he'll want to consolidate power. And if he does—if he becomes the governor—it'll be an entirely different city. His military tactics, his 'order'—it won't be long before those who are used to pulling the strings in the shadows are stripped of their power."

Lord Veylock paused for a moment, considering the weight of what he was saying. Then he quoted directly from the article, his voice low but certain.

Lord Veylock:
"'If Daava is not found and brought in for questioning before Election Day, Captain Ishtar will likely be elected by default, as he remains the only candidate still in the running.' If that happens, it will mark a dramatic shift in the city's political landscape. Ishtar will have the full weight of the law behind him, and the rest of us? We'll be under his scrutiny."

Morten leaned forward, his eyes wide.

Morten:
"Are you saying we should fear him, then? That's a bit much, isn't it? He's just a man, Veylock. With all his talk of law and order, that's exactly what we need. The city's overrun with crime. If we don't get a handle on things, we'll all be in danger. Even you, my lord."

Lord Veylock's gaze hardened.

Lord Veylock:
"You don't understand, Morten. If Ishtar is elected, the entire city will be his target. Every faction, every criminal group—ours included—will be hunted like rats in a cage. And I've lived too long in the shadows to be caught by a man like him. He'll come for us all eventually. You might think this is about cleaning up the city, but it's not. It's about power. He wants it all."

Morten looked down, pondering Veylock's words. He'd always seen Doskvol's troubles as something to be cleaned up, a mess to be swept away. But Veylock was right about one thing: Ishtar wasn't a mere cleanup man. He was a man who would reshape Doskvol. And no one, not even the powerful Lord Veylock, could predict what that would mean for them.

Morten:
"So what do we do then, Veylock? We sit back and let Ishtar take the throne?"

Lord Veylock:
"No. We wait. We let Daava's scandal unravel itself. We let the city turn against him. But we don't let Ishtar rise unchallenged. Not yet. There's always room for us to maneuver."

Lord Veylock stood, his figure towering over the firelight. His next words were cold, deliberate.

Lord Veylock:
"If Ishtar becomes governor, Morten, it will be the end of everything we know. We must make sure that doesn't happen—or if it does, that we are ready to play our hand in a very different game."

Morten nodded slowly, his thoughts a little heavier now. He had underestimated the stakes, but Lord Veylock had a way of making everything seem more... significant.

Morten:
"I understand, my lord. We wait. But we'll be watching."

Lord Veylock turned away, his eyes glinting in the low light as he stared out the window, the weight of Doskvol's future pressing down on him.

Lord Veylock:
"Yes, Morten. We wait... and we prepare."

Chapter 9: **The Last Candidate**

The city of Doskvol woke heavy that morning, the air thick with fog and the lingering scent of smoke that had clung to its crooked chimneys since the battle at Assumption. The church still bore the scars of the fighting—stones cracked from fire and lightning, windows shattered from shockwaves. The papers shouted headlines of scandal and outrage, voices in the streets carried gossip of conspiracies, and everywhere the hum of unrest lay like a taut wire, waiting for the wrong hand to pluck it into chaos. The people of Doskvol were used to tension, but not like this. Every faction had been burned, every street pulled into someone's scheme, and now even the faithful were whispering doubts after seeing their own holy ground turned into a battlefield.

But beneath the endless churn of wagons, the toll of bells, and the restless flapping of seabirds over the Dusk River, there was a corner of Crow's Ward where the world seemed to still. The Crows' modest house, nothing more than a crumbling old residence tucked in between brick warehouses, kept its secrets close. Its shutters sagged, its roof tiles were slick with moss, and its walls bore the quiet defeat of a structure that had seen better days. To the neighbors, it was a building best ignored. To the Crows, it was home. Inside, behind thick curtains and locked doors, the faint glow of candlelight stretched across damp plaster walls, pooling shadows in every corner. At the center of the room sat a rough wooden table, warped by years of use, and on it a map of Doskvol lay sprawled—creases cutting across its districts, inked notes marking strongholds, whispers of power, and scars of battles that had yet to heal.

Rabbit Foot leaned forward over the map, his fingers pressed flat against the surface as if holding it down could somehow keep the city itself from unraveling. His voice was quieter than usual, stripped of its usual humor, touched instead with a cautious edge that carried through the dim air. "The Gloam Sisters," he muttered, eyes scanning the map as though they might sprout more shadows if he looked away. "Rumors say they've started moving again. No more staying in their damned haunted manor, no more whispering in corners. They're pushing. Attacking. Taking." He tapped one inked mark on the map with a sharp flick of his nail. "Every whisper I've heard points the same way—they're not hiding anymore. And that, boys, means they'll be our problem sooner than we'd like."

Jack lounged across his chair, one leg hooked lazily over the other, his grin sharp even in the wavering candlelight. He exhaled through his teeth, as though amused at Rabbit's worry, and flicked his finger against the edge of the map. "We've dealt with worse. Hell, look at the Ember Circle—they're crawling on their knees now. We burned their mask clean off at Assumption. That church? It's ours, whether the faithful know it yet or not. We walk back in there tomorrow, they'll pray with their heads bowed and their coin boxes open. That's not desperation, Rabbit—that's control."

Harry leaned forward, his arms folded tight against his chest, his gaze flickering between the map and Jack's careless smile. His voice came lower, sharper, lacking the bravado Jack carried so easily. "It's not that simple. Faith makes people do things gold never will. You think you can buy your way into their prayers, but all it takes is one preacher spitting fire and suddenly you've got a mob clawing at your throat." He shifted, his jaw tight, but added with a kind of reluctant practicality, "That's why we put Jim Bob in there. He's already working, already nudging things the right way. A foot in the door's better than a knife in the back. Give him time, let him grease

palms, make the place listen to him. That way, when we move, the ground doesn't shake beneath our boots."

Harleena, crouched with her dagger in hand, ran the blade slowly across a whetstone, the steady scrape marking the rhythm of her discontent. Her eyes glinted, catching the candlelight with a restless shine. She let them talk, let the words spool out, before cutting her own thread into the weave. "You're all so caught up in churches and whispers and who controls what brick." Her voice was calm, almost too calm, the kind that always promised something sharper beneath. "But none of you are asking the only question that matters." She paused, eyes narrowing as she glanced around the table. "Where the hell is Merrow?" The name fell like a hammer. The scrape of her whetstone slowed, then stilled, and the silence that followed was heavier than smoke. Harleena's smile was thin, humorless. "He's out there. Laughing. Planning. And you're sitting here playing chess with ghosts and priests."

Rabbit looked away from the map, his expression darkening as though he'd already thought the same thing but hadn't wanted to speak it aloud. Jack only smirked, though the edge of his confidence dulled just a little. Harry's eyes tightened, his hand flexing against the table. The question hung unanswered, and maybe it couldn't be answered, not yet. But it burned all the same. Jack broke the silence first, standing with a stretch that pulled the tension out of the room if only for himself. He swung his coat over his shoulders, his grin sliding back into place like armor. "Well," he said, brushing a hand through his hair as though the weight of their words hadn't touched him at all, "when the world gets this heavy, best thing to do is take some air." He tilted his head toward the door, already walking. "Try not to start another war while I'm gone."

The door creaked behind him, letting the night air breathe in, damp and sharp with mist, before it closed again, leaving the Crows in their candlelit shadows, their map, and the unanswered ghosts of their city. The night air was sharp and unforgiving, carrying with it the metallic tang of coal smoke that never quite left Doskvol's lungs. Mist clung to the stone streets like damp linen, wrapping the city in a cold embrace that seeped into bone and marrow alike. Jack drew in a long breath, the chill biting as it filled his chest, grounding him in that familiar unease that only Doskvol could give—half life, half rot. The city's rhythm pulsed faintly around him, never silent, never still: the distant grind of gears and pistons from the factories in the Docks, the hollow ring of boots on cobblestone blocks away, the cry of some drunk wretch echoing off the bricks before being swallowed by fog. That was why the other sound stood out so sharply. Faint at first, but wrong. A dragging shuffle. The kind of muttering that carried no sense, low and broken, the voice of someone either mad or hiding. It came from the bins outside their house, and every instinct Jack had honed over years screamed at him that it didn't belong here.

His hand moved of its own accord, fingers brushing the hilt of the knife tucked at his side, the weight of steel a small reassurance as his eyes narrowed toward the darkened alley mouth. He stepped closer, just enough to peer, the lamplight from the street catching on damp metal lids and the faint scuttle of a rat. The muttering stopped for a heartbeat, then started again, quieter, like words pushed through a mouth half-full of dirt. Jack's pulse quickened, the hairs along the back of his neck rising, and for the first time in a long while, he stopped. He wasn't the sort to balk at shadows, but this wasn't a night for chances, not with the city the way it was and every faction with a blade in hand. He turned, smooth as he could manage, the fog swallowing his retreat as he made for the door.

Inside, the warmth of candlelight was waiting, the low murmur of voices still circling their map, their plans. Jack walked in as if nothing had unsettled him, but his shoulders carried a tension sharp enough to cut. He let the door click softly shut behind him, masking the edge in his tone with calm insistence. "Harleena," he said, pitching his voice just enough to draw her attention. She glanced up from her blade, the dagger catching the light as she drew it against the whetstone with deliberate precision. Her eyes fixed on him with curiosity. "What?" Jack jerked

his chin toward the door, casual but clipped, his grin nowhere in sight. “Something’s in our bins. Might be nothing. Might be something. Get your dog.”

The grin that spread across Harleena’s face was a dangerous thing, sharp as broken glass, lit with the kind of delight only she could find in the promise of trouble. She whistled low and sharp, and the beast that had been dozing by the hearth snapped awake at once. The hound was a scarred brute of a thing, all coiled muscle and jagged teeth, trained not just to obey but to hunt. Its ears pricked forward, body tense as a drawn bowstring, waiting for the command. “Go find it,” she murmured, her voice carrying like silk over steel. The dog shot forward, claws scrabbling briefly against the wooden floor before it slipped into the night, silent as a shadow peeled from the walls. The door swung closed behind it, leaving only the echo of its paws fading into the fog. For a moment, the house fell quiet, the weight of curiosity and unease stretching taut in the air. The Crows looked at one another, waiting for the sound of discovery—or the silence that would mean something far worse.

A moment later, a startled yelp tore through the fog, sharp and panicked, followed by the unmistakable scrape of boots dragging across stone. The sound was ugly—like something being hauled against its will, claws scrabbling for grip, flesh fighting to break free. Jack and Harleena stepped into the alley, the mist parting just enough to reveal the hound’s hulking shape emerging from the dark. Its jaws were clamped tight around an ankle, teeth sunk deep into threadbare fabric, pulling its prey forward with grim purpose. The figure attached to it flailed weakly, his tattered coat catching on the cobblestones, tearing further as he clawed at the ground for purchase. He looked less like a man and more like refuse dragged out from a gutter. Jack’s stomach twisted, recognition striking him like a blade drawn too suddenly. Beneath the filth, beneath the grime-streaked cheeks and thinning, sweat-soaked hair, the face was unmistakable. The lines of privilege were still there, buried under despair, the remnants of a man who had once stood at the highest seat of the city. Governor Cross Daava.

Back inside, the room was so quiet it felt like the very walls were holding their breath. The candles flickered faintly, the shadows stretching long over the cracked plaster as the Crows gathered around their uninvited guest. Daava sat slumped in a wooden chair that seemed far too big for him now, his body trembling with exhaustion, hands shaking as he wiped at his mouth with quick, nervous gestures. His clothes—once the tailored finery of Doskvol’s most powerful official—were nothing but rags now, stained and torn, patches of fabric hanging loose where the seams had given way. His skin, pale as old wax, glistened with a sheen of cold sweat, and his eyes darted between them with the restless, cornered panic of a rat caught in a trap. Whatever pride had once armored this man was gone.

Jack leaned back against the table, arms crossed, his expression unreadable but his stance heavy with disdain. Rabbit Foot stood with his hands folded neatly behind his back, his gaze cool, detached, studying the governor the same way he might study the turn of dice before making a bet. Harry perched on the edge of a desk, silent, his sharp eyes flicking between Daava’s trembling fingers and his twitching jaw, calculating, dissecting. Inwardly, even he couldn’t piece it together—why the highest political man in all of Doskvol, the one whose name was printed in bold across every paper and shouted in every street, was sitting here in their ruin of a hideout, pulled in like some drunk off the docks. Harleena crouched low in front of him, her grin stretched wide with a delight that made her look almost feral. Her hound sat faithfully at her side, its muzzle slick with spit, licking at its chops as if the taste of the governor’s blood and sweat had been nothing but an appetizer. Daava wouldn’t even meet its eyes; he flinched each time its tongue rasped across its teeth. The governor, the man who was supposed to embody order and command in Doskvol, now looked like nothing more than a coward clinging to his last breath of relevance.

Rabbit's voice cut through the silence, low and steady, each word deliberate as it carried across the room. "You mind telling us why the Governor of Doskvol is rummaging through our trash?" Daava's voice cracked as he tried to steady himself, his trembling hands knotted together in his lap. "I am in the correct house, right?" he asked, his words rushing out in nervous stammers. "I hope I am. I… I'm looking for the Crows. They might be my last chance to survive. I was told it's somewhere in this neighbourhood." His eyes darted from face to face, searching for a scrap of confirmation, but the only answer he found was the silence of the room pressing against him like a wall. The Crows glanced at one another, a shared look that spoke of equal parts suspicion and grim amusement, their shadows flickering against the plaster walls in the candlelight.

Rabbit finally broke the pause, his tone even, his stare fixed sharp on the crumbling figure of the governor. "What do you want with the Crows?" Daava exhaled hard, like the words themselves were pulling the air out of his lungs. His hand dragged over the few tufts of thinning hair clinging stubbornly to his scalp, and his gaze dropped to the table as though afraid of what he might see in their eyes. "You—" he started, but the word stuck in his throat. He swallowed, tried again, looking up at them with desperation swimming in his bloodshot eyes. "You don't read the papers?" Jack, leaning casually against the table with his arms folded, arched a brow, his voice smooth with cutting sarcasm. "Let's assume we don't give a damn." Daava let out a chuckle that carried no laughter, only the brittle sound of a man fraying at the edges. His voice rasped hoarse, cracking under its own weight. "The election," he said, his throat working around the words. "My reelection is in three days." His hands wouldn't stop shaking, twitching against his knees, and every pause he took seemed to stretch like rope tightening around his neck. "Every other competitor? Gone. Disappeared. No bodies. No explanations. It's just me… and Morian Ishtar."

The silence that followed was slow and suffocating, filling the room until even the hound at Harleena's feet seemed to sense it, ears tilting back at the shift in the air. Her grin curved wider, sharp and dangerous, her tone dripping with mock sympathy. "That's a damn shame." Daava snapped his gaze to her, his eyes wide, desperate enough to make the candlelight shimmer in them like water. "You don't understand," he hissed, voice breaking. "Ishtar is killing them. I know it. I barely escaped my own home—there were men outside my window, waiting for me to sleep." His breath hitched raggedly, his chest heaving as panic fought with exhaustion. He looked at each of them in turn, his voice rising, frantic. "I know what you are. I know the things you do. You don't care about loyalty or honor, just results." Jack tilted his head, that familiar half-smirk tugging faintly at the corner of his mouth. "That's not an insult."

Daava swallowed, his throat working visibly, before blurting out the plea that had been clawing its way up his lungs. "I need to disappear. Fake my death. Get me out of Doskvol before Ishtar finds me. I'll pay. Whatever you want." The words hung in the still air, heavy as a noose. The Crows exchanged a long, unreadable glance, the silence between them saying more than words could. Jack dragged a hand over his face, letting out a low breath that carried more frustration than surprise, before shifting his weight against the edge of the table. He cast his gaze around the room, eyes narrowing at each of them in turn. "Alright," he said, voice dry, cutting through the thick silence. "Do any of you even know when these elections were happening?" The looks he got in return were blank, almost sheepish. Rabbit gave the smallest shake of his head, arms folded neatly behind his back as if even admitting it was beneath him. Harry shrugged from his perch on the desk, his expression flat, a touch embarrassed, but not enough to apologize for it. Harleena snorted under her breath, twirling the tip of her dagger along her palm, clearly more interested in watching Daava squirm than in city politics.

"No one?" Jack pressed, incredulous. "Not a damn one of you?" Rabbit raised a brow. "I don't make it a habit to follow men in suits arguing over who gets to tax us more." Harry leaned forward, his arms folded across his knees, his voice quieter, thoughtful. "Maybe we should start. It's not like it's a game anymore, is it? They're stepping into our shadows now. People like

him—" he gestured toward Daava, who sat trembling in his chair, "—deciding if we get to breathe or hang. Might be worth paying attention." Rabbit's eyes flicked toward him, then back to Daava, his tone sharpening. "One thing's clear. Morian Ishtar is the last bastard we want holding the keys to Doskvol. The man's entire philosophy is locking up people like us and throwing away the key."

Harry's mouth pressed thin, his voice edged with something darker. "He already doesn't like us. We're not exactly unknown to him, you know that. He—" He stopped, his eyes flicking quickly to Daava before biting the words back. He couldn't mention the Millenium Rod, not here, not with the governor's ears twitching at every slip. "He's already got reason enough to put our heads on spikes." Daava leaned forward suddenly, desperation pushing past his fear, his words spilling out in a rush. "You don't understand—Morian isn't just a soldier, he isn't just law. He kills. I've seen—"

"Quiet." Harleena's voice cut like a blade, sharp and abrupt. Her grin faded into something colder as she tilted her head, eyes narrowing on him. "Stay quiet, governor. The adults are talking." Her hound shifted beside her, baring teeth as if to punctuate her command, and Daava snapped his mouth shut, his throat bobbing as he swallowed whatever horror he'd been about to spill. Jack's gaze flicked between his crew, a weight settling in his eyes that wasn't often there. "So what's it going to be? We let Ishtar walk into that office, crown himself the king of Doskvol, and paint a target on every one of our backs?" Rabbit's jaw tightened. "If he takes power, we're done. Doesn't matter how many jobs we pull or how deep we dig into the city, he'll dig deeper. He'll tear us out by the roots." Harry's voice was steady now, but there was a flicker of unease in it. "So can we afford to let him win? Or is this one of those fights we can't avoid, even if it kills us?"

The room fell still again, the weight of the question pressing heavy in the damp air, each of them knowing the answer wasn't simple, and that whatever choice they made would carry the kind of consequences that never stopped chasing you. A quiet moment passed, the kind of silence that didn't belong to chance but to calculation. Rabbit Foot's breath came slow, deliberate, and when he spoke, his words carried the weight of certainty. "We can't let Ishtar win." His tone wasn't dramatic or loud—it was flat, almost eerily calm, as if he were stating the result of a dice roll already cast. Harry's eyes, sharp and restless, flicked to him with immediate agreement. "If he takes office, he'll own this city. He'll have the police, the courts, the treasury—he'll be untouchable." His voice dipped, quieter but edged with steel. "And we'll be first on his list. He'll make examples out of us."

Jack leaned forward slightly, studying Rabbit with a look that revealed nothing yet promised everything. His smirk didn't come, not yet—just that long pause as he weighed the gamble in the air. His voice, when it broke the silence, was smoother than it should have been, laced with a confidence that filled the cracks left by Rabbit's bluntness. "Then we make sure he doesn't win." His words carried a dangerous finality, one that made Daava's trembling form in the chair seem even smaller against the flickering candlelight. It was decided in that instant—not by votes, not by argument, but by the inevitability of survival. The Crows had danced too long in the shadows to let a man like Ishtar flood them with light. They wouldn't take Daava's money. They wouldn't smuggle him to some safe harbor, or shuffle him off onto a ship under false papers. There was only one use for a man like him now: bait. Expose Ishtar. Ruin him. Destroy his campaign before it had the chance to crown him. Jack let the smirk return then, slow and sharp, curling like smoke across his lips as he turned to face their guest. His eyes softened, voice smoothing into something almost kind, almost reassuring. "We'll help you fake your death."

Daava's whole body crumpled with relief, the weight spilling off his hunched shoulders so suddenly it almost looked like he might collapse from the release. His hands went slack against his knees, fingers twitching like a man who had been holding his breath for hours and had finally

found air. Tears brimmed unbidden at the corners of his eyes, slipping free and trailing down the grime on his cheeks. They weren't sobs, not the loud desperation of a broken man, but quiet tears that betrayed just how far the governor of Doskvol had fallen. He didn't notice the glances that flicked between the Crows like cards passed under a table—measured, silent, merciless. He didn't see Harleena's grin falter into something sharper, or Rabbit's eyes narrow with the weight of the plan, or Harry's jaw tighten with the unspoken truth they all knew. Cross Daava, governor of Doskvol, wasn't their ally. He wasn't their client. He was their bait.

A few days later, the city wore its suspense like a bruise, and the plan fit into it as naturally as a blade into a sheath. The Crows had played this game long enough to know the rules—bait, lure, expose, survive—and they moved through them now with the weary precision of professionals who understood that luck was useful but timing was everything. Cross Daava's escape had been breathed into the right taverns and guardhouses, slipped into the ears of the right coat-turned informants, floated like oil over the gossiping gutters of Ashmere Hall until it caught fire on its own; now all that remained was to let the blaze draw the right moth. They would drive him out of town in a way loud enough for even the dimmest watchman to notice, an obvious desperation that had the shape of a trap only if you knew how to read the angles. Rabbit Foot took the reins, leather creaking under his grip, the horses' breath steaming pale in the chill as the carriage rattled along the chewed teeth of the cobblestones; every jolt ran up through the axles and into his bones, a steady drumbeat that kept his nerves and the pace exactly where he wanted them.

The street smelled of wet stone and coal ash, morning mist combing low along the gutters, gaslamps still guttering weakly as if reluctant to surrender the hour; Rabbit's eyes never stopped moving—doorways, alleys, windows half-lidded with grime—counting shadows, counting chances. Inside, beneath thin wood panels that shivered with every bump, Daava crouched in a cramped blackness, his breath loud to his own terrified ears, his knees aching, his palms slick; each time the carriage hit a rut he clamped his teeth around a whimper and looked to his left where Jack, in a near-perfect imitation of Daava's torn coat and jittery composure, sat with the hunch and darting eyes of a man about to ruin his own shoes. Jack had the governor's tremor, the shallow swallow, the way the chin tucked and lifted like a man listening for his own verdict—he had studied weaknesses and learned to wear them like a second skin; now and then he tipped his fake hat low and murmured just loud enough for the real one to hear, "Breathe, governor. The dead don't gasp," a cruel kindness to keep the man still.

Ahead of them Harry rode point, his horse's hooves ticking quick flints from the road, cloak snapped clean by the wind; he kept three lengths out, scanning the flow of traffic, the way conversations died when he passed, the way a lamplight's reflection turned sudden in a window—small tells that the road was or wasn't about to become a throat. Behind, Harleena ghosted the margin where road met hedgerow, her hound pacing beside her with that predatory, unhurried ease that meant it was both leashed and ready; she let the fog take her shape and give it back wherever the cover was best, never once letting the wheels out of her sight. For the first hour the route unspooled like a prayer you almost believe in: working carts with sleepy drivers, a bent nun sweeping a stoop, a fishmonger swearing at a busted wheel, all of it ordinary enough to make even a cynic's shoulders loosen.

Then Harry took the next bend and crested the rise, and his body told the story before his voice could—he sat taller, went very still, a cold line of awareness pinning him to the saddle as the scene ahead resolved out of the mist: a police checkpoint, not the slapdash sort that turns out pockets for lunch money but a bulwark—barriers braced, rifles stacked, warrant boards hammered up wet and shining, officers in tight knots trading the kind of clipped words that taste of orders. Too many uniforms. Too many eyes. They were stopping everyone: carriages dragged

aside, pedestrians put against posts, drivers with hats in hands and backs bent just enough to show they could be broken if required. The air itself felt inspected. Harry's stomach cinched, an old cold riding up his spine; he turned his head just enough to cut a signal back through the fog. The horses blew white into the morning. The road narrowed into a funnel. And every face at that checkpoint turned with the same hard hunger, eyes bright and focused, searching.

Harry knew this was for them. Every fiber in his body screamed it. The way the guards' eyes tracked too sharply, the way their hands hovered a little too ready over steel—it was a net, and Morian had taken the bait. His chest tightened. This was too early. Too soon. The timing wasn't right, the road wasn't right, but his instincts overrode the logic, the same instincts sharpened by months of running cons, slipping from nooses, and clawing through the shadows with the Crows. Survival, trickery, desperation—they were second nature now. He pulled his horse's reins just enough to tighten the muscles in her neck, his whole posture sinking low with the anticipation of an actor before the curtain. He leaned down to her ear, the warm breath fogging against the coarse mane. "Time to put on a show, girl." His whisper was sharp, urgent, but carried a strange kind of trust, the trust only a man who had run too many cons with the same partner could give.

In a single motion, he dropped the reins loose and sent a small spark of energy through the contact of his boots, a ripple of unnatural force that sank into her muscles like fire catching on oil. The change was violent. Chupeta reared, the sound that left her throat was not just a whinny but a piercing, bloodcurdling scream, the kind of sound that split through the fog and made every head turn. Her front hooves pawed wildly at the air before she crashed back down and bolted forward, speed exploding through every sinew. Harry clung on, jerking in the saddle with deliberate panic, his arms flailing wide, reins whipping loose, the picture of a man who had lost all control. He let his boots slip in the stirrups, leaned too far into each lurch, his face contorted in just the right measure of terror to sell it.

The checkpoint erupted in an instant. Guards shouted, boots hammering on the cobblestones as they scrambled to get out of the beast's path. Barrels toppled, crates smashed open in clouds of dust and splintered wood, one weapons rack clattering to the ground in a hail of steel that rang sharp against stone. A lantern overturned, spilling oil that caught the edge of someone's boot and sent him cursing. The lead officer barked orders over the din, but the words drowned beneath the chaos of a panicked animal turned loose in their ranks. Harry pitched his voice into the storm, cracking his throat on the scream. "Help! She's out of control!" His tone wavered between desperation and dread, the kind of plea that made even the hardened pause. He yanked the reins savagely to the left, making the horse skid sideways in the mud, clods of dirt exploding under her hooves, nearly throwing him clear off. The guards lunged, grappling for leather straps that twisted out of their hands, struggling to pin down the rampaging animal as she carved a path of chaos through the checkpoint.

Through it all, Harry caught the corner of the play he had set in motion—the real performance, the reason for all of this noise. Just beyond the thrashing blur of Chupeta's mane and the snapping shouts of the guards, the carriage slid past. Smooth. Silent. Rabbit hunched low, his knuckles white on the reins, his posture loose but his focus razor-sharp, the wheels of the carriage gliding over cobblestones with the quiet ease of a shadow cutting through the mist. Not a glance given, not a sound raised. The perfect slip. Rabbit's lips curled into a smirk, the kind that lived between admiration and irony. That damn kid. He really knows how to cause a scene now. Rabbit had met Harry when the boy was just a skittish nobody, fresh out of whatever quiet, dull life he had come from. Back then, he could barely hold his own in a game of dice, let alone a fight. But now? Now he was playing the city like a fiddle, spinning chaos and fortune in equal measure. Rabbit kept driving, never looking back. He didn't need to. He knew Harry would get away.

By the time Harry hauled Chupeta into submission, her chest heaving with the hard rasp of exertion, half a dozen officers were on him. Hands grabbed at the reins, yanking them taut, another pressed a steadying palm to the horse's trembling flank, whispering curses under his breath as the animal finally stilled, steam rising in thick clouds from her nostrils. Harry let himself sag in the saddle, chest rising and falling like a man who'd just wrestled death itself. "Off the horse!" one officer barked, his voice sharp, authority cutting clean through the noise. Harry obeyed instantly, slipping out of the stirrups and dropping to the muddy ground with a practiced stumble. He raised both hands, palms open, as if surrendering to their anger. His eyes darted nervously, his voice cracking just enough to sell it.

"Gods, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to cause all that trouble," Harry stammered, brushing his mud-smeared coat with shaking hands. "She spooked—been trying to break her in, but I'm not good at it yet. I swear, she just bolted." The lead officer stepped closer, his boots squelching in the muck, his face hard as stone. "Name."

"Harry," he blurted, quick but not too quick, blinking as though startled by the sudden question. "Harry Byers." He fidgeted with his sleeves, letting the nerves bleed into every gesture. "And where's home, Byers?" the officer pressed, eyes narrowing. Harry shifted his weight from foot to foot, shoulders hunched like a boy being scolded by a teacher. "Ashvale, sir. Near the river bend. My aunt lives out on the edge of town—I was going to visit her, bring her some bread and coal." He glanced back at the now-calm horse with a sheepish grimace. "Wasn't expecting her to lose her head like that. First week I've ridden her alone." A younger guard sneered. "First week? You nearly killed half my squad, boy. You think that's funny?"

Harry shook his head so fast his hair flopped into his eyes, his expression wounded, earnest. "No, sir, no—I'd never—look, I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm sorry. I'll walk her from here if it keeps the peace. Just let me by, please. My aunt's waiting." His voice cracked at the end, threaded with desperation. Not too much, not groveling, just enough to seem genuine. The officers exchanged glances, grumbling among themselves. The lead man grunted, jaw tight. "You've just trampled a checkpoint under orders from the Captain himself. You're lucky you're not being dragged off in chains." Harry dipped his head, eyes lowered, contrition dripping from his every move. "I'll take whatever punishment you think is fair, sir. I just… I didn't mean for any of it. I'm not good with horses yet." He managed a weak, self-deprecating chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck as if embarrassed by his own ineptitude.

The lead officer studied him for a long moment, his gaze searching for cracks. But Harry's wide-eyed innocence held fast, his shoulders slouched like a boy caught stealing sweets, not like a conman distracting an entire squad while a carriage slipped by. Finally, the man sighed, shaking his head. "Get out of my sight, Byers. And keep that beast under control, or next time you won't get words, you'll get irons." Harry nodded quickly, relief flooding his face like a man saved from the gallows. "Yes, sir, thank you, sir. Won't happen again." He grabbed Chupeta's reins with trembling hands, patting her neck as if trying to soothe them both, then led her forward past the checkpoint with small, careful steps. His heart hammered in his chest, but his smile—hidden by the tilt of his head—was sharp. Another lie spun, another escape secured. He was getting better at this. Much better.

Harry caught up with the group just beyond the checkpoint, his horse still slick with sweat, nostrils flaring as the night air cooled her steaming hide. The road stretched ahead in a gray ribbon, the light of the city dimming behind them as they pushed farther into shadow. The lamps of Gloamhaven grew distant, their soft glow lost against the mist, and before long the cobblestones gave way to cracked stone and patches of wild weeds clawing their way through the fractures. The air shifted too—what had been the bustling breath of the living city now smelled faintly of mildew and wet earth, a damp chill rolling in from the abandoned blocks that marked the border of the Lost District. The silence there was heavier, broken only by the creak

of wagon wheels and the occasional call of some unseen bird roosting in the skeletal remains of old tenements.

That was when Rabbit spotted it. A carriage drawn half off the road, its rear axle split so cleanly it looked as if some giant hand had snapped it in two. The vehicle leaned awkwardly, its wooden frame groaning under its own weight, while a small group of men clustered around it in the dark. Their voices carried low, muttering, sharp with frustration. Hands gestured in quick, clipped motions toward the wheel and the splintered axle, their bodies restless with the tense energy of travelers caught in misfortune. Rabbit felt it immediately—the tug deep in his gut, the sense that the dice had been cast and now lay waiting to be read. Luck had always been strange with him, a silent whisper guiding him toward one choice over another, and right now it pressed on him hard. He pulled their own carriage into a slow, cautious stop, reins tight in his hands.

Inside, Daava noticed instantly. The governor's shoulders stiffened, his fingers gripping his knees as if he were holding himself together by sheer force. He turned to Jack, his voice low, strangled by panic. "Why are we stopping? No one said anything about stopping." Jack, slouched in the gloom and dressed in Daava's rags, leaned closer to the small hole in the wood, peering through at the stranded travelers. His face was unreadable, calm as stone, every line of his posture radiating the quiet trust that Rabbit knew what he was doing. "Relax, Governor. It's just a broken carriage."

Daava shook his head so hard sweat glistened at his temples. "No. No, no, no. This wasn't the plan. We need to keep moving—keep going! This is a mistake!" His voice rose in pitch, wobbling at the edges, his carefully constructed composure unraveling strand by strand. "We shouldn't even be here! I should be halfway out of the city by now!" Jack tilted his head, studying him like a bug twitching under glass. "And where exactly do you think you're going to run to, Daava? You can't hide in Doskvol. You can't hide anywhere."

"I'll find a way," Daava snapped back, his eyes darting toward the door as though he might fling it open and hurl himself into the night. "I can bribe someone! Get on a boat! Anything is better than sitting in this death trap!" Jack exhaled a long, lazy sigh, stretching his arms above his head as if the governor's panic were little more than a tedious speech. "Here's the problem, Governor—you don't have a plan. You think running off into the night with no resources, no allies, and no idea where you're going is going to save you?" Daava's jaw clenched, his teeth grinding audibly. "It's better than waiting to be slaughtered like a pig." Jack leaned closer, a slow smile cutting across his face, the kind that didn't reach his eyes. "No, it's really not. You see, we do have a plan. And unlike you, we actually know how to pull one off." He gestured loosely toward the wall, where muffled voices still carried from outside. "And right now, that plan involves not drawing attention by ignoring people in need of help when we're supposed to be playing the part of good, innocent travelers."

Daava let out a sharp breath, his hand dragging across his damp forehead as though he could wipe away his fear. Jack clapped him lightly on the shoulder, the gesture mockingly reassuring. "Sit tight. And try not to look like you're planning to bolt the second I turn my back." Outside, Rabbit had already dropped from the driver's bench, boots crunching against the gravel as he rolled his sleeves up. The night was close, mist pressing down, every sound ringing louder than it should. He strode toward the stranded men with a loose grin plastered across his face. "Need a hand?" he called, his tone casual, practiced, the easy drawl of a man with nothing to hide. One of the men turned, a broad-shouldered fellow with a thick beard catching the faint glow of a lantern. He scratched at his chin before nodding toward the splintered wheel. "Axle's shot. We were just about to get started on a fix, but an extra set of hands wouldn't hurt." Rabbit grinned wider, clapping his palms together like he'd been waiting for the invitation all night. "Lucky for you, I've got two."

Harleena stood near her mare, the reins coiled loosely in one hand while the other drummed impatiently against the hilt of her curved dagger. The shadows clung to her like a cloak, the mist beading in her hair and catching the faint gleam of her eyes. She wasn't smiling now. Her lips were pressed thin, and the muscles in her jaw twitched as she muttered low, almost to herself but loud enough for Harry to catch. "This is slowing us down." Her gaze never left the broken carriage, her tone sharp as a blade being honed. Her fingers tapped faster against the dagger's grip. "I don't like it. Never liked strays on the road. Strays usually bite." Harry pulled Chupeta to a slower walk, steadying the mare with a soothing pat down her neck. He still felt the thrum of energy in his veins, the lingering buzz from the chaos at the checkpoint, but his breathing was evening out now, his sharp grin replaced with something more thoughtful. "Not everything's a trap, you know," he said, his voice low but edged with a faint humor. He swung down from the saddle, boots squelching in the damp earth, and dusted off his gloves. "Sometimes a broken axle is just a broken axle."

Harleena gave him a sideways look, one brow arched high, her eyes narrowing like she was weighing whether to carve the optimism out of him with her knife. "And sometimes a broken axle is a noose waiting to tighten," she said flatly. Her hound shifted beside her, ears perked, nose twitching at the air. She lowered her voice, leaning a little closer to Harry. "Your show back there bought us time, sure. But time only matters if we don't waste it standing in the mud." Harry gave a half-smile, tilting his head toward the men gathered around the shattered wheel. "Rabbit's good at reading people. If something's off, he'll see it." He exhaled, his breath curling in the cold. "And if it isn't? Well, a little goodwill with strangers doesn't hurt the disguise."

Meanwhile, Rabbit crouched by the broken axle, sleeves rolled high, his hands already dirtied from prying at the splintered wood. He spoke easy, slipping into conversation like it was a card trick he'd practiced a thousand times. "Looks like the road's been eating wheels for dinner lately. You come from Gloamhaven?" The bearded man grunted, steadying the wheel while another hammered at a brace. "South side. Factory run. Thought this road was quicker."

"Quicker," Rabbit echoed with a chuckle, twisting the brace into place with practiced ease. "Depends who you're running from, doesn't it?" His grin flashed as the men chuckled nervously, not sure whether it was a joke or a warning. That was when he noticed him. One of the men hadn't joined the work. He stood just off to the side, boots planted too firmly in the earth, arms crossed like he was guarding something instead of waiting for repairs. At first glance he looked ordinary—another tired traveler cursing his luck—but Rabbit's eye caught the way his coat sat wrong on his shoulders, the stiffness in the seams. The fabric bulged faintly where it shouldn't, square and heavy in places that ought to move easy. Armor. Hidden, but not well enough. Rabbit felt that familiar flicker in his gut, the whisper that came when luck nudged him to pay attention. For a moment, he held the man's gaze across the dark, waiting to see if the stranger would flinch, move, betray himself. But the man didn't. He just stood there, watching, his face a mask of indifference. Doing nothing. So Rabbit ignored it.

The work finished quickly after that, the axle braced, the wheel fitted back on with a grunt of effort and a muttered curse from the bearded man. Gratitude came in brief nods and mumbled thanks, no warmth behind them but no hostility either. Rabbit dusted his hands on his coat and tipped his head in easy farewell, climbing back up to his seat. And soon, two carriages rolled side by side into the deepening night, the dark road stretching ahead like a vein into the unknown.

The road stretched out before them, the shadows of the Lost District swallowing the last remnants of Doskvol's civilization behind them like a throat that had forgotten how to be kind. The wind came low and mean through the shattered ribs of old stone, humming in broken arches, worrying loose slates into soft clacks, and dragging with it the wet smell of damp mortar and the distant, almost cloying sweetness of rot from the Deadlands beyond, a reek like fruit left

too long under a bell jar. Rabbit Foot eased the team, leather whispering and tack creaking, until the carriage rolled to a careful halt before what had once been a bridge checkpoint and was now only a skeleton of posts and rusted chain and a sign broken off at the middle so it read nothing at all. Jack kept still in the dark belly of the wagon, feeling the boards breathe against his back with each equine shift, his fingertips tapping a quiet metronome against the flat of the hidden knife strapped beneath his sleeve, counting heartbeats, counting chances. The second carriage behind them rattled to a stop as well, iron band on wheel giving a tired little shriek, and that landed wrong in Jack's gut; too close to the place where this all needed to blossom into a clean disaster, too close for anyone not in on the bloom to be matching their pace. Every second they sat here bled advantage into the open air, gave Morian's men time to sniff the lie and choose where to bite.

Outside, wood carried voices like a drumhead, and Harleena's cut through first, a low slice. "Rabbit, you see that?" Then Rabbit's answer, level as a plumb line through a storm. "Yeah. They stopped too." Jack let his eyes fall shut and pressed the back of his head to the boards, feeling the carriage's old sap-cold grain against his scalp; beside him Cross Daava breathed like a bellows with a leak, ragged and fast and never full, each inhale a small drowned sound. The governor had been unraveling by the hour, each halt a finger tugging at a thread, each glance from a stranger a new little blade; Jack had seen it before—the minute when fear climbs up into a man's skull and takes the chair where his reason used to sit.

Boots shuffled outside, grit grinding under heels, and Jack slid his attention sideways without moving anything you could see. A man from the other wagon called out, voice pitched to casual and missing it by a hair. "Why'd we stop?" Rabbit came back honey-smooth, the sort of ease that slid over sharp things. "Just taking a moment. Checking the path ahead." The stranger's reply had the wrong weight, like a hand testing a door that should be locked. "You should keep moving." Not advice. A probe. "Don't worry about us," Rabbit said, still velvet. "We'll be right behind you." The pause that followed was too long, the kind of silence that sets dogs to bristling, and then hoofbeats grew from the dark behind them—another carriage rolling up slow, the wheel-song new, uninvited, inevitable. Jack's stomach turned once and went still; a second wagon meant more eyes, more questions, more room for their con to snag on a nail.

Beside him the door plank creaked under Daava's shift, and Jack didn't need to look to know the man's thoughts had bolted ahead of his body and were already crashing through dead hedges in the ruins. "Stay still," Jack murmured, the words catching in the straw-damp air. Daava answered with a whisper that trembled like a blade held by a tired hand. "We should go. Now. We should get out and run into the woods before they see us." Jack kept his gaze on the seam of light at the door, made his voice a stone in a river. "You run, you die." Daava's teeth clicked together. "Sitting here is just waiting to be caught!" Jack rolled his shoulders once, bleeding tension out through bone, and refused the itch to look at him; panic spreads by eye contact. "You're not thinking straight. Look at them, Daava. They're still talking. That means they don't know what's happening yet." And then the world cut in with a sharp whistle that shaved the quiet clean, followed by a guard's bark too pleased to be righteous. "That's him! That's Cross Daava!" Jack went still to the marrow, feeling the thought land: they hadn't seen the real Daava under the floor, but they must have gotten a peak at Jack. Daava's breath hitched like a man slipping on ice; his fingers dug into the seat until the wood complained, his body coiling, every tendon ready to sprint straight out of the masquerade and into a bullet. Jack let one slow breath measure him back to center and slid a thumb under the edge of his disguise, settling the lay of cloth and shadow; it was not perfect and did not need to be, it only had to survive the first look and the first lie. "Stay put," he said, soft and iron, and then he put his hand to the latch, gathered the mask over his bones, and stepped out.

The air outside hit him like a blade, sharp with cold and sharper still with the weight of eyes waiting for him to stumble. The guards stood in a half-circle, six—no, seven—steel and leather

shadows bristling in the dim light, their pistols drawn. Boots dug into the ruined cobblestones, shoulders squared, the smell of oil and wet wool hanging around them like smoke. They hadn't stepped in yet, but the air told him they were seconds from it, a pack just waiting for the signal. At their front, the leader, thick-necked and heavy through the shoulders, stood like a man born to uniforms, one hand planted on the grip of his pistol, the other curled into a fist so tight the knuckles strained white. His eyes didn't flicker, didn't question—he was a man who wanted to believe orders meant certainty.

Jack lifted his chin, his breath slow and measured, pressing the hammer of fear deep into the chest and shaping what leaked through into something that looked like arrogance. His gaze wandered the field, catching the small signals from the ones that mattered—Rabbit just behind his team, reins loose but body coiled like a gambler palming a card; Harry a little further, jaw clenched, eyes darting too fast to pass for calm; Harleena leaning back with a slouch that was all teeth, her eyes locked on the soldiers like she was already choosing which throat she'd cut first. He rolled his shoulders until they hung loose, forced a half-curve into his lips. A grin, arrogant enough to sting. "Gentlemen," he said, voice smooth as silk pulled over wire. "I'm flattered by the warm welcome."

The leader's face twisted, lip curling with contempt like the words had left a taste of ash in his mouth. "Save it, Daava. You're coming with us." His voice was rough, official words dragged over gravel, rehearsed by rote. "You are under arrest for crimes against Doskvol. We are hereby under orders to take you into custody and hold you until further interrogation and investigation can be done."

Jack tilted his head, letting the smirk widen, his tone light but soaked in mockery. "Now, why would I do that?" The words carried just enough amusement to sting, just enough doubt to make the others hesitate, their weight shifting, eyes flicking toward the leader for permission to strike.

The man stepped forward, boots crunching, the darkness in his eyes heavy and humorless. "Because Captain Morian Ishtar is already on his way." His words dropped like stone into water, no give in them, only finality. "And once he gets here, this stops being an offer."

Jack breathed slow, as if considering it, as if tasting the edges of fear. Then he let out a soft chuckle, his head shaking with deliberate calm, the sound cutting against the tension in the air like glass breaking under velvet. "Ishtar himself?" he said, low and almost reverent before the curve of his mouth widened into a knife's smile. "Now, that's truly an honor."

The leader's patience frayed at the edges; Jack saw it, the twitch in his jaw, the way his fingers flexed against the pistol grip, the subtle shuffle of the men behind him leaning into readiness. That was the crack. Push harder.

Jack took a step closer, his boots whispering against the stone, closing the gap just enough that the guard had to tilt his head, had to listen. He dropped his tone to a murmur, a quiet rasp that cut sharper than a shout. "Let's be honest with each other," Jack said, his words soaked in confidence, his eyes never breaking from the soldier's. "We both know Ishtar doesn't want me in a cell. He wants a corpse. If I go with you now, I don't make it through the night. You don't make it through the night." The faint twitch at the corner of the guard's mouth, the flicker of unease in his eyes—it was there, gone in a heartbeat, but enough. Jack leaned just a little closer, his smirk tightening into something colder. "You know who Ishtar is. What he does to the people he doesn't need anymore. You really think he's gonna let you walk away after this?"

The guard's jaw worked, his teeth grinding as the words sank in. For a moment, Jack felt the balance shift, the hesitation creeping in, the conflict breaking through the armor of obedience. The man's eyes darted, just briefly, and Jack knew he had him. Then a voice cut through the night, sharp as a whip crack. Another guard, further back, his stance rigid, eyes narrowed.

“Sir—it’s a trap. He’s stalling!” Jack’s heartbeat spiked like a drum in his ears. Too late. Someone had read it off him—his timing, his calm, the way he was dragging the conversation out by threads. The lead guard’s eyes snapped open, the doubt gone, replaced with a sudden, cutting clarity. His voice ripped through the air, a command that made the whole line of soldiers shift like a single body. “Reinforcements! Call the captain—NOW!”

Jack didn’t think. He moved. His hands shot forward, fast and ruthless, seizing the lead guard by the collar of his uniform and yanking him forward with the strength of a desperate man who had done this a hundred times before. The man let out a startled grunt, boots scraping against stone as Jack dragged him bodily into the carriage before the others could blink. The door slammed behind them with a hollow crack that echoed in the tight space. Cross Daava was already out of his hiding place, his gaunt face pale and gleaming with sweat, his wide eyes locked in horror on the scene. He flinched back into the corner as Jack forced the guard down onto the opposite bench with a brutal shove, the man thrashing once, twice, before freezing at the cold kiss of steel pressed to his ribs. Daava’s breath came in short, panicked bursts, his lips trembling as he spat, “What the hell are you doing?!” His voice cracked high with terror, the words breaking like glass. Jack didn’t spare him so much as a glance. His gaze was fixed entirely on the guard, his voice dropping low, calm, each syllable honed like a blade. “I’m having a conversation.” The guard’s chest rose and fell in shallow jerks, his pulse hammering visibly in his throat, his breath sharp with fear and defiance, caught between the steel at his ribs and the shadows closing in outside.

Outside the carriage, the noise swelled like a rising tide—boots grinding against stone, weapons being cocked, voices clashing over one another as orders were barked sharp and urgent. Jack could hear the ring of steel drawn from scabbards, the unmistakable thunder of rifle stocks slammed into shoulders, the guttural commands of men who thought they had the upper hand. They were demanding surrender, shouting for the Crows to lay down their weapons, but Jack knew better than to hope for a quiet ending. The Crows would never bow their heads. Not to Ishtar. Not to anyone. He had lit the powder keg, and the sparks were already crawling down the fuse. It was all about to go down.

“You’re dead,” the guard spat, his voice low, bitter with certainty. His breath came ragged, his chest heaving against Jack’s blade, but his eyes glimmered with a stubborn fire that hadn’t yet been smothered by fear. “You don’t have a way out of this.” Jack sighed through his nose, a sound more weary than angry, as if he had grown bored of hearing the same old line. He tilted his head, his smirk curling like a knife wound. “You people really need to get better at lying.” The edge of his blade pressed harder, a subtle warning. The guard’s glare tightened, but no words followed, his silence louder than defiance. Jack leaned forward, the heat of his breath ghosting against the man’s ear, his tone quiet, measured, unnervingly calm. Too calm. “You don’t have to die here.” The words hung in the cramped space like smoke, heavy and clinging, daring the guard to test them. Still, the man didn’t move. Jack let the silence stretch, let it squeeze tight around the guard’s throat until even the steady hum of voices outside seemed distant. Then he leaned in closer, his lips almost brushing the man’s ear, and spoke the truth.

“We’re trying to protect this poor, cowardly bastard,” he said, flicking his knife in Daava’s direction. The ex-governor sat trembling in the corner, pale and useless, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly hold himself upright. “And the only thing we need from you is a little silence.” The guard’s eyes darted toward Daava, then back to Jack, his throat bobbing visibly against the blade. Jack could feel the shift in him, the moment fear cracked the iron plate of duty. A long, shaky breath slipped from the soldier’s lungs before he gave a stiff nod, once, twice, the sweat on his temple catching the dim lantern light. Jack exhaled slowly, easing back but keeping the knife steady, his smirk softening into something coldly approving. “Smart man.”

He reached into his coat, fingers brushing against familiar glass until he pulled free a small bottle, the size of a man's palm. Inside it, shadows swirled like liquid, twisting against the glass as though desperate to escape. Jack held it out, his eyes locking onto Daava. "This place is no longer safe for you," he said, his tone sharp, commanding, brooking no argument. "You're going back to the hideout." Daava's lips parted, the first syllable of panic already forming, but Jack cut him off with a glare so sharp it sliced the words before they left his throat. His voice came like steel dragged against stone. "Take the bottle. It's a teleporting spell, meant to carry two. A gift from an old fool we met. It'll get you both there—you and this officer. Don't worry. My friends in the house are waiting for you."

Daava's trembling hands reached forward, fingers brushing against the cold glass, clutching it as though it were the last candle in the dark. His breath rattled as he fumbled with the stopper. The moment it came loose, the magic surged outward in a violent bloom—thick tendrils of black mist coiling through the air, wrapping around Daava and the captive guard. Their forms twisted, the light warping, their screams muffled as though they were being dragged beneath the skin of the world itself. Then, with a sudden implosion, reality swallowed them whole. A sharp pop echoed in the cramped carriage, and they were gone. Jack sat back, the empty seat before him like a gaping wound, the smell of ozone and ash clinging to the space where they had been. His knife lowered, though his hand never loosened its grip on the hilt. The world outside had grown louder—shouts multiplying, boots pounding, the storm gathering just beyond the wood. He tilted his head, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips, though his eyes were cold, steady. Ishtar was coming. And Jack would be waiting.

Rabbit watched the scene unfold, his jaw tight, sweat gathering at the nape of his neck despite the cold night air. Surrounded on all sides by Imperial police, their lanterns glaring through the fog, their rifles leveled and their voices sharp with authority, he could almost taste the iron bite of the noose tightening. And yet there was Jack—disguised as Governor Cross Daava, cloaked in the rags of a cowardly politician, and somehow showing more defiance, more steel, more life in his voice than the real man ever had. Rabbit's knuckles whitened on the reins as he watched his friend spin the danger into something else entirely, buying seconds with words, dragging the enemy's eyes and ears exactly where he wanted them.

Then, in an instant, Jack moved. The blur was so fast Rabbit nearly missed it, only catching the sudden motion as Jack's hand shot out, seizing the nearest guard and yanking him inside the carriage. The door slammed shut with a crack that echoed like a gunshot. For a breath, the whole world froze. The guards faltered, blinking, uncertain, the disbelief still hanging in the fog between them. That fragile silence lasted no longer than a heartbeat before chaos exploded outward. Orders were barked, furious and panicked. "Surrender! Lay down your weapons!" The air shook with the sound of boots striking cobblestone as the cordon tightened. Shouts rang out, reminding them again and again that they were surrounded, that there was no way out. The hammering chant of law closing in. And then Rabbit heard it—the pop. A sharp, unmistakable sound from inside the carriage, like air being sucked through a crack in the world. His gut dropped. He knew that sound too well. Jack had used his trinket he stole from Trickerium. Daava was gone. That was it. The only thing left to do was run.

Rabbit didn't hesitate. He cracked the reins hard, his voice cutting sharp into the night as he shouted at the horses, driving them into a desperate gallop. The carriage lurched forward violently, wheels screaming against the uneven cobblestones, sparks flying as the iron rims bit into stone. The draft animals strained, muscles bulging beneath their sweat-slick hides, foam flecking from their mouths as they thundered down the road. Shots rang out instantly, cracking through the mist like lightning strikes. Rabbit ducked low, the reins hot against his palms, his teeth gritted as lead whistled by close enough to burn the air. Some of the blasts he recognized, their rhythm different—sharp, measured bursts fired by Harry, answering back with quick precision. A harsher crack followed, accompanied by a metallic echo he knew well—Harleena,

firing with reckless glee, her laughter likely riding the report of each round. But most of it—the endless volley screaming past his ears, smacking into the carriage wood, biting into the dirt by the horses' hooves—belonged to the Imperials. The whole cordon had opened fire, their barrels spitting death into the fog, and Rabbit was in the very heart of it, the eye of the storm. But they had a captive now. That was the difference. They had a man who had heard the orders, who had spoken to them, who could be made to talk. Jack's plan, for all its madness, was working. Through grit teeth and the thunder of hooves, Rabbit allowed himself the smallest curl of a smirk. Chaos was their element—and tonight, they'd drown their enemies in it.

They had not managed to move even two meters away when the sound came. A voice, not like anything human, bellowed from somewhere behind them, sharp and guttural, carrying syllables twisted with an ancient weight. It was a word none of them understood, a command spoken in a tongue too old to belong to Doskvol, but its force was undeniable. It ripped through the night like a blade across steel. The air itself bent under it, compressing in on their lungs before bursting outward in a violent wave. The shockwave hit like an explosion, rattling their bones, shattering glass from nearby ruins, tearing up the cobblestones beneath the wheels. The carriage lifted from the ground and flipped violently onto its side, splintering apart in a shriek of wood and iron. Horses screamed in pain and terror, their harnesses snapping as they crashed into the dirt, their panicked hooves thrashing against stone. Rabbit felt himself wrenched through the air like a rag doll, the reins torn from his blistered palms, before he slammed into the ground hard enough to knock the breath out of him. For one long, choking heartbeat, the world was nothing but silence and the hammering thud of blood in his ears.

His vision spun when he forced his eyes open, dust and splinters choking the air, the night fractured into shifting shapes and ghostly outlines. Through the haze, through the broken ribs of the shattered carriage, Rabbit saw him. A man, tall and composed, standing in the wreckage as if the chaos had made a stage just for him. His cloak billowed unnaturally around his frame, not stirred by wind but by the weight of the word he had just spoken. He was the source of the Voice.

Harry clawed his way upright, coughing as he fought against the choking dust, his lungs burning. The sight of the man sent a jagged shiver crawling down his spine, an instinctive recognition that twisted his gut. He had heard the stories, the whispers spoken in gambling dens and around the firepits where mercenaries told tales they swore were true. The Voice of the Dragon. A power only spoken of in hushed tones, a gift—or curse—so rare it was said to hollow a man out from the inside. Few wielded it, and fewer still survived long with their sanity intact. But among those who had, one name always stood out. A name wrapped in dread. The Morvane.

Harry's hands curled into fists, trembling with adrenaline and fear, the taste of iron rising in his throat. Before he could shout a warning, before he could rally the others, his gaze caught on a movement in the distance—shapes breaking through the swirling dust, a slow procession of silhouettes moving with deadly purpose. They parted the fog with every step, and at their head came Morian Ishtar himself.

The very air seemed to hush around him. Not from magic, not from force, but from something heavier—like the world itself understood the danger of his presence and paused to prepare. He was not tall, nor built like the heavy-shouldered enforcers that marched at his sides, but none of that mattered. There was a stillness to his form, immaculate, controlled, terrifying in its simplicity. His silver-white hair fell wild across his brow, yet somehow crowned him, a tangle of steel threads that caught the lamplight as though each strand had been blessed. His eyes were calm, unreadable, pools of pale danger that gave nothing but promised everything. His skin was moonlit marble, flawless, untouched by age, by stain, by humanity. A golden circlet pressed against his temple, gleaming cold, while from his left ear dangled a feathered earring that shifted

softly as he walked, whispering of rituals and old meanings. His black uniform fit with merciless precision, each button a statement, each crease sharp enough to cut. The white collar at his throat gleamed so impossibly clean that Rabbit thought it had never once known blood, as if the world itself refused to soil it.

And beside him, moving with a predator's poise, came Bruce Wallunde. His steps were steady, his presence carved from stone and restraint. He was taller, leaner, built with the wiry strength of a man who had fought and killed too often to waste anything on excess. Black boots, dark gloves, a coat stitched with reinforcement at the seams and shoulders, its fabric chosen for impact, for pursuit, for survival. His scar was unmistakable—a pale vine of burned flesh curling down his left cheek, healed but never hidden, a mark of violence that spoke of survival more than pain. His expression was still, locked, like a mask built to cage the storm raging behind his eyes.

The Crows had heard of him. They had whispered of him in their hideout, of the traps he had laid across Doskvol, of the nets that drew tighter around Jack each day. They had called him relentless. They had called him dangerous. And now he was here. Not chasing for himself. Not freelancing. But standing at Morian Ishtar's side.

Bruce Wallunde, bounty hunter of fearsome reputation, was now wearing the leash of Doskvol's rising power. And tonight, he was here for Jack.

Rabbit's gut twisted, his heart sinking like lead. This was no ambush. This was a reckoning. And no matter how sharp their knives, no matter how quick their wits, the Crows would not walk away from this night unscathed. This was not going to go well for them—not tonight.

The Crows scrambled, boots slipping on shattered cobblestones slick with mud and horse blood, dragging themselves behind the turned-over carcass of the carriage. Splintered wood and twisted iron jutted up like broken ribs, barely enough cover against the ring of Imperial rifles that glittered in the firelight. Rabbit pressed his back to the wreck, blood seeping warm down his temple from a jagged cut that had nearly split his brow, the copper taste of it thick on his tongue. Jack crouched beside him, wiping at his own bleeding forehead with the back of his hand, his disguise still clinging to him like a half-shredded mask. Their breaths came harsh, ragged, swallowed by the chorus of barked commands from all around: *Surrender. Drop your weapons. On your knees.* The shouts came from every direction, overlapping, relentless, sealing in their doom.

Across the fogged field, Morian Ishtar stood like a conductor at the center of his orchestra, his pale eyes gleaming, his lips curved into a smile that didn't need teeth to wound. He wasn't rushing. He wasn't sweating. He was savoring it, toying with them, as if this wasn't a battlefield but a stage, and he already knew the ending. The calm weight of his gaze was worse than the rifles. Worse than the magic. It promised inevitability. Rabbit spat blood into the dirt, eyes darting at the encroaching wall of black uniforms, then muttered low to the others, his words dry with gallows humor. "This may have been a bad plan after all."

"Not *shit*, Rabbit!" Harry's voice cracked as it left his throat, the fear breaking through, high and sharp. He crouched low, knuckles white around the grip of his pistol, his whole body trembling with the effort of staying still when every instinct screamed *run*. His wide eyes flicked from the soldiers closing in to the shadows beyond, searching for an escape that didn't exist. Harleena crouched at the far edge of the wreck, her eyes glinting in the lantern glow as she stole a quick peek over the ruined wood. Her hound growled low at her side, hackles raised, the animal sensing the slaughter pressing in from all sides. "They're moving in slow," she hissed, ducking back down, her voice rapid and tense. "Two on the left, rifles aimed. Three straight ahead—no, four. And the others are circling, closing us in like rats in a barrel." Her smile had vanished. For

once, even Harleena's voice carried no laughter, only the quick precision of survival. Just beyond her words, they all saw it—Morian leaning toward Bruce and the other figure, his hands gesturing in small, deliberate movements, his voice a low murmur carried away by the fog but heavy with command. Bruce Wallunde's still face tilted once in acknowledgement, his scar catching the light, his hand flexing over the handle of his weapon like a predator preparing to strike.

Jack dragged in a breath, his back pressed to the broken wood, and asked the question that had already hollowed his chest. "Why is Bruce here?" Rabbit's lips twisted, the blood on his teeth making his grin a grimace. "Word is, he wants you, Jack. Since that thing from the invention fair." Jack let out a breath that was almost a laugh, bitter and low, and muttered, "Well shit." His eyes dropped to his knife, the blade trembling slightly in his hand. The circle of Imperial rifles inched closer, boots scuffing on stone, barrels gleaming, the silence between their shouted orders filled with the clicking of hammers being drawn back. Harry shut his eyes tight for a moment, sucking in air, forcing it through his lungs like he could steady the shaking. His breaths came harsh, measured, desperate. Then he opened his eyes, and though they were still wide with terror, there was something behind them now. Something dangerous. "Guys…" he said, his voice shaking but louder this time. "I think I know a way out." The words fell heavy in the wrecked silence, as though the ruined carriage itself was listening, as though the night held its breath to hear if they could possibly survive what was coming. For a heartbeat, it felt like the end—the noose already drawn, the trap already sprung—and only Harry's words stood between them and death.

He clenched his jaw, summoning every ounce of power in his blood, teeth set so hard they creaked while the world around him drew in like a held breath; the air hummed, thick with a low metallic throb that made lantern glass tremble in their brackets and set the hair on the backs of necks bristling, and Harry's hands shook as he reached into that deep, ancient well of something he barely understood, a cold, fathomless reservoir he'd only ever brushed with the tip of his mind; then he called it forth, dragging it up through marrow and nerve until his bones felt hollowed and ringing. The ground trembled—first a shiver like a dog throwing off rain, then a hard, rising convulsion that cracked old mortar and rattled loose stones—and from the ruptured seams of the road a horror shouldered into the world, wet with shadow and older than any prayer spoken on these streets: ten heads rising like coiled serpents from the same obscene trunk, ten arms unfurling in jagged, grasping arcs, a mass of muscle and nightmare stitched together by hunger; its many golden eyes blinked open one by one, lantern-bright and unblinking, scanning the battlefield with a predator's stillness before fixing, all at once, on Ishtar and Wallunde as if the decision had been there from the beginning, written into the beast's first breath. Harry exhaled sharply, breath frosting in the cold, and his voice scratched out of him, small and lethal: "Go," he whispered, and the creature obeyed like a thought given teeth.

The charge broke the night in half; boots skidded, rifles bucked, curses snapped, and the battlefield exploded into a violence that swallowed orders and oaths alike, every guard pivoting, sights jerking, fingers convulsing on triggers as muzzle flashes strobed along the fog; the thing moved with terrifying speed, a smear of claws and gnashing maws and flailing limbs, faster than a body that size had any right to be, tearing through blue coats and brass buttons like paper soaked in oil, tossing men aside in arcs that ended against stone with sickening, abrupt percussion. Ishtar reacted immediately, the gun whispering into his hand with the inevitability of habit, but it was too late; a flood of smothering dark swept over him as the monster's mass crashed across his line, swallowing the shine of his circlet and the white of his collar, sending him skidding into a chewed bank of rubble with a sound like slate splitting; Wallunde barely dodged in time, rolling sideways in a plume of grit, that scar on his cheek flashing pale as he ghosted under a hammering limb, rising with the same measured economy he did everything, eyes narrowed, coat flaring as the creature smashed through the sundered carriage behind him, splinters geysering, iron bands twanging past in lethal hummingbirds that made men duck and

scream. Shots cut wild in every direction; a stray round scored across Harleena, a hot stripe ripping cloth and skin in a kiss of fire that twisted her forward with a hiss between clenched teeth, and her hound, answering the gunfire and her pain with the old language of pack and blood, launched into the scrum, jaws finding a distracted guard's calf and closing with a dreadful certainty, dragging him down in a tangle of limbs and steel as he howled and hammered at the dog's skull with the butt of his weapon.

Harry felt his grip slipping even as the monster rampaged; this was powerful magic, too much drawn too fast, and he was balanced at the cliff edge of himself, boots skidding on loose shale with nowhere to go but down; every impact the creature took rang through him like a bell struck inside his ribs, every slash that marred its hide stung his nerves raw, a phantom pain that licked along his spine and set his vision sparking at the edges. The creature thrashed, heads snapping in different directions with obscene synchronicity, massive arms scything pews of men off their feet, tearing helmet leather and rifle wood with equal indifference, and Harry knew if he let the reins slip for even a heartbeat, it would turn that hunger on anything warm, friend or foe. Then—an echo in his mind, cold and alien and shaped like a command not his own, a pressure pushing sideways against his will like a glacier grinding a valley into new lines; a foreign presence, one that did not belong, slid its fingers into the cords of his control. Harry's head jerked, gaze finding the source as if yanked on a hook—the Morvane, rooted amid the chaos as though his boots had grown into the stone, hands weaving ancient sigils that left afterimages in the air like burnt-on retina ghosts, lips moving in a low, resonant chant that seemed to come from the ground as much as from his throat, eyes glowing with a furnace calm that was all contempt and concentration. Harry gritted his teeth until something popped in his jaw. He was fighting for control, feeling the beast hitch and shiver between two masters, its limbs stuttering with that sickening marionette tug of conflicting orders. The two locked eyes across the torn street, fog boiling between them, gun smoke curling around their faces like veils; Harry's heartbeat counted down to something he didn't have a name for, and he set his feet in the rutted earth and shoved back with everything he had as the battle of wits and will began.

The beast shuddered violently, its many heads thrashing, its ten arms jerking in spasms as though invisible chains pulled it in opposite directions, splitting its hulking frame between masters. Its golden eyes flickered with confusion, some snapping toward Ishtar's men with hunger, others swinging toward the Crows like a predator caught mid-hunt. The sound it made was unbearable, a chorus of screams layered over guttural roars, like steel bending under pressure and bone grinding on stone. Harry's body trembled with the strain, every muscle in his frame screaming as he dug deep into that endless black reservoir, forcing his will into the beast with every shred of strength he could scrape together, commanding it, demanding it obey. But the Morvane was there, a relentless tide pressing back, his chant resonating like drums in Harry's skull, his alien will hammering against Harry's defenses until it felt like his brain would split down the center. It was a battle not of blades but of minds, of raw willpower, each second stretching into eternity.

When the Crows saw what Harry had conjured, their hearts stuttered. Even in the chaos, even as smoke burned their throats and bullets cracked the stones around them, they could not help but stare. This wasn't some parlor trick. This wasn't a boy with a knack for charms. Harry, who still fumbled dice games and bluffed with the eagerness of a pup, was standing against a nightmare and bending it to his hand. Shock, disbelief, maybe even pride sparked in their eyes—but they didn't have the luxury to dwell on it. Not now. They seized the distraction Harry had bought them, using the chaos of the writhing horror to burst from their cover, their blades and guns flashing in the haze as they fell upon distracted guards. Riflemen turned too slow, eyes still locked on the monstrosity, and Harleena was already there, striking hard with the hilt of her knife and the quick snap of her boot, dropping men into unconscious heaps before they could cry out. Rabbit moved like smoke through the confusion, his blade flickering in and out of the fog, each strike deliberate, each step survival, disarming and flooring opponents with brutal

efficiency. And in the eye of it, Jack saw his chance. The monster lashed out, one colossal arm swiping like a wrecking ball, and Bruce Wallunde was caught by the edge of the blow. The bounty hunter was thrown into the rubble, rolling across broken stone, his balance ripped from him, his mask of stillness shaken for the first time. He staggered, disoriented, and Jack moved. He slid low through the wreckage, his body flowing between shards of wood and stone like a shadow born from the fog itself, closing the distance in heartbeats. By the time Wallunde looked up, Jack's blade was already at his throat, the steel pressing tight against the pale scar that split his cheek.

Jack's voice came low and cold, sharp enough to cut without the steel. "Stop," he ordered, breath hot against the bounty hunter's ear. "You come with me." Wallunde's lips curled, slow, deliberate, a predator's grin. His voice was quiet, steady as stone. "You think I'd surrender?" Jack pressed harder, the edge biting just enough to draw a bead of blood, his grip iron. "You don't have a choice." Wallunde's smile widened, something grim and final in the twist of it. Then, with a flick as casual as lighting a match, he drew two small, round shapes from the folds of his coat. Grenades. He held them open-palmed, the metal catching the light, the pins already loosened, his thumb resting loose and ready over the triggers. The world seemed to freeze, the noise of the battlefield receding into the background as Jack's heart stopped dead in his chest. "I'd rather die," Wallunde whispered. His voice carried no tremor, no hesitation—just calm, final certainty. Jack's grip wavered for the first time, his knife trembling against Wallunde's throat, as a single thought hammered through his skull like a drumbeat. *This bastard really means it.*

Rabbit Foot's breath came fast and hard, his lungs burning with smoke and exertion, each inhale dragging like glass down his throat. His eyes flicked across the battlefield, chaos searing itself into his mind—Harry hunched and trembling, Harleena's dog tearing through the ankle of a screaming guard, bullets biting the dirt like angry hornets. And then he saw it. Jack. Knife pressed tight against Wallunde's throat, the edge glittering with a cruel promise. But Wallunde wasn't afraid. He was smiling. That scarred face twisted into something calm, deliberate. Then Rabbit's gaze dropped, and his blood turned ice. The grenades. Heavy, round, the pins already loose. Resting in Wallunde's hands like the grip of inevitability.

Jack was about to die.

There was no time to think. No room for hesitation. Rabbit's voice ripped out of him, raw and desperate, "Jack, no!" His body moved before the thought had even finished forming. He exploded forward, faster than flesh and blood had a right to move, instincts sharpened by a lifetime of impossible escapes and desperate calls. His hand found Jack's collar in mid-motion, yanking him back with such force that the Slide tumbled out of Wallunde's reach, sprawling into the dirt. Rabbit dragged him hard behind the nearest heap of shattered stone and wood, the world narrowing to nothing but survival.

Nearby, the creature Harry had conjured writhed, its ten heads thrashing in agony, its limbs spasming as if some invisible chain had snapped. Harry's voice cracked from his chest, a single wordless command bellowed through clenched teeth and bleeding gums, and the beast obeyed, collapsing with earth-shaking weight. It fell directly onto Wallunde, smothering him beneath a mountain of writhing flesh and chittering eyes, pinning him and the grenades in one grotesque embrace. For a single moment, the battlefield froze. Smoke held in the air. Gunfire stilled. Even Morian's smile faltered. Then—

BOOM.

The world split open. The grenades erupted inside the beast, detonating with a thunderclap that tore the monster apart from the inside, its flesh boiling into burning shreds, a mist of blood and bone spraying across the ground in a crimson rain. Chunks of smoking meat rained from the

sky, thudding into dirt and stone with wet, obscene finality. The blast wave hurled Rabbit backward, slamming him into the wreckage, ears ringing, body splattered with gore. But louder than the explosion were the screams. Harry's and the Morvane's. They howled as one, their voices splitting through the chaos, agonized mirrors of the creature's final destruction. Both were tied to it, mind and marrow, and as the beast's body ruptured, they felt its pain in every nerve, every bone, a shared torment that ripped through their very souls. And then came the sound that chilled the marrow of every living thing within earshot. A howl—not human, not beast, not anything of flesh. It rolled across the battlefield, deep and unnatural, like the toll of a bell struck on the other side of the veil. It carried with it the weight of endings, the certainty of death, the kind of sound that made even the bravest heart stumble. The Espiritas. Summoned by death itself.

They were coming. Their base was close by—close enough that in any corner of Doskvol, they could have been only minutes away, but here? Here, they would be moments. Pulled into the world by the burst of life extinguished so violently. The Espiritas force that dealt with ghosts, curses, the arcane rot in the city. And the Crows? They had no chance to escape them. This was very, very bad news.

The first sign was the screech of iron-rimmed wheels grinding against stone, a sound that cut sharper than steel and carried the weight of inevitability. Then came the thunder—the pounding of hooves, heavy and unrelenting, shaking the ground as if the earth itself braced against what was coming. The Espiritas arrived in carriages unlike any others in Doskvol, their black-lacquered frames gleaming like obsidian under the jittering glow of the street lamps. Symbols of warding were carved deep into the steel-reinforced doors, each one glowing faintly with the erratic pulse of electroplasm, arcs of pale light dancing across the grooves like veins of lightning trapped in iron. They moved too fast, unnaturally so, their faceless drivers hunched and motionless, black hoods pulled low, guiding the spectral mounts with jerks of the reins that looked more ritual than command. The first carriage slid into place, iron-shod wheels screaming against the cobblestone until sparks sprayed outward in a violent hiss of orange. The doors flew open at once, like jaws unhinging.

The Espiritas emerged like phantoms from nightmare. Their uniforms were the perfect marriage of law and death: long, black coats fastened high at the throat with silver clasps forged in the shape of ravens, the birds' wings spread as if mid-flight. Their faces were hidden behind masks that mimicked the plague doctors of centuries past, elongated and cruel, beaks tipped in steel, glass eyes hollow and gleaming with a faint, unearthly glow. Those lenses, everyone knew, allowed them to see the dead. Some whispered they saw more than that—that no soul, living or otherwise, could hide from those eyes. Intricate runes stitched into their coats shimmered faintly as they stepped into the fray, wards humming with contained power, the fabric itself alive with sigils that writhed when looked at too long. In their gloved hands they carried batons, each one sheathed in electroplasmic energy, buzzing and crackling like stormlight compressed into steel. The air thickened with static at their approach, every breath charged, every nerve raw.

The battlefield fell silent the moment their boots hit stone. Not willingly. But because the Espiritas did not permit violence to continue in their presence. The first to move was a guard, still drunk on fear and fury, who had raised his blade high over Rabbit, ready to strike while the man reeled from the aftermath of the explosion. The Espirita closest to him didn't so much move as *appear*. In the space of a heartbeat, the officer closed the distance, his black coat flaring like wings, and slammed his baton into the guard's ribs. The weapon sang with a sharp, violent crack as electroplasm discharged in a blinding arc. The guard's scream was strangled, his body convulsing as though his very essence had been ripped loose, then he collapsed, twitching, smoke curling faintly from his clothes.

Before that corpse had even hit the ground, a second Espirita surged forward, this time straight for Jack. The Slide barely had time to react, blade flashing in his hand, before the officer's baton came down with surgical precision, knocking the weapon from his grasp. The steel clattered uselessly across the stone, and Jack snarled, struggling, trying to twist free. But the Espirita was faster, stronger, inexorable. With brutal certainty, the baton struck across his chest. The contact tore a scream from Jack that was more than pain. It was raw, guttural, the kind of sound that didn't come from lungs but from something deeper. For an instant, it was as though his very soul had been scraped raw, ripped forward like it was about to be torn free from his body, before it snapped violently back into place. He collapsed to one knee, his face twisted in agony, his breaths shallow and broken, the taste of copper flooding his mouth. Rabbit's head snapped toward the sight, fury sparking wild in his eyes. Jack had wanted Morian Ishtar's throat on the end of his blade, had been seconds away from reaching for it, but now? The Espiritas had closed ranks around him, their black shapes forming a living wall, silver clasps glinting, electroplasm snarling, pushing back anyone who dared step too close. Ishtar stood untouched, shielded by law made flesh.

Rabbit clenched his fists until his nails bit his palms, chest heaving, the taste of copper and smoke on his tongue. He was still reeling from the desperate save he'd made dragging Jack away from Wallunde's suicide play, the adrenaline fading fast, his limbs trembling with the hollowness that always followed unnatural exertion. His body screamed to collapse, but his mind knew better—there was no collapsing in front of the Espiritas. The battle was done. Over before it had even begun. Jack raised his head weakly toward Rabbit, his jaw clenched, voice rough and broken from the scream but steady enough to be heard. "We can't fight them."

"We won't," Rabbit said, and even with his wrists half-raised and ash in his teeth, there was iron in it. Jack scowled, a crooked slash of defiance across a blood-streaked face. "You got a plan?" Rabbit nodded once, the smallest tilt, the kind you only catch if you've learned to live by it. "Yeah." Jack sighed, shaking his head as the Espiritas' shadows fell over them like a curtain dropping on a doomed act. "I hate when you say that." A moment later, the Espiritas took them. No shouting, no scrambling victory—just cold, methodical inevitability. Hands wrenched behind backs, electroplasmic manacles snapping shut with a hiss that tasted like lightning, blades plucked from belts and boots with the neatness of a ledger audit. Harry swallowed the last ragged edge of panic and let his gaze turn empty, the better to be underestimated; Jack bared his teeth at the nearest beaked mask and got a baton across the shoulder for the effort; Rabbit didn't bother performing—he saved it, as ever, for the moment it mattered. They were marched past Ishtar, who stood just outside the reach of the humming batons as if the world itself refused to smudge him. His eyes tracked them with that serene, polished certainty, the faintest lift at the corner of his mouth the only admission he was enjoying the view. Black carriages yawned open. The Crows were shoved inside, the doors slammed, and Doskvol's night swallowed their last sight of the bridge in a smear of rain and sparks.

They were bound, their weapons confiscated, and dragged to the prisons of Doskvol for interrogation. Iron corridors breathed cold, damp air; lamps guttered behind wire cages; runes stitched along the walls pulsed like slow heartbeats, denying whispers and swallowing prayers. For days, they were questioned. For days, the Espiritas tried to break them—bright gas mantles hurled glare into their eyes, spirit-bells thrummed in low, nauseating chords, batons tapped ribcages with just enough current to make muscles sing and teeth chatter while masked voices asked the same careful questions three dozen different ways. Jack turned sarcasm into a second skin and bled humor through a split lip rather than give them the satisfaction; Harry played the trembling novice who barely knew the names of his own friends, all apology and quaver and blank, guileless eyes whenever the ledger came out; Rabbit Foot, always thinking ahead, had planned for this. He kept his answers dull enough to bore a clerk, his temper banked like a coal under ash, and when the guards finally allowed him his one request, he took it. He was allowed to contact someone. Not an ally. Not a fellow gang member. To Cosine, the

politician that he and Harry had cultivated connections with, that Rabbit had under his thumb. The line crackled through a warded speaking tube; Rabbit pitched his voice into the polite churn of civic panic and slipped coded courtesies between the pleasantries—weather, charity drives, horse stocks—and the soft clink of leverage he'd amassed over months: a ledger misaligned by three zeroes, a letter that never should have been sent, a face that had been where it shouldn't. A man who knew how to shift the story in the right direction. And shift it he did. While the Espiritas stacked reports and sealed transcripts, Cosine coaxed and cut, placed a whisper in the Blade Chronicle's ear, slid an affidavit across the right desk, framed a narrative with expert hands until ink did what iron couldn't. Thanks to the information extracted from the guard that Jack kidnapped inside the carriage—signed beneath a truth-sigil and witnessed by two masks—the attempt on Cross Daava had become public knowledge with all the stench of an extrajudicial execution ordered from on high. The scandal bloomed like a bruise.

Days later, the Crows walked free, their names wiped clean from the records of the Espiritas, for now. Shackles unlatched with curt clicks, property returned in a tray that somehow felt lighter, a baton-gloved hand gesturing them toward the rain as if dismissing smoke from a room. Outside, Doskvol howled. Broadsheets slapped wet against brick: ISHTAR TIED TO GOVERNOR PLOT—SOURCES INSIDE IMPERIAL POLICE; placards were ripped down as fast as they were pasted; Gloamhaven salons shuttered early and Crow's Ward taverns stayed open late, the city arguing with itself across alleys and avenues. Instead, the attack was pinned on Morian Ishtar himself, and the glow that used to sit around his name cooled to ash overnight. By the time voting day came, Doskvol had no candidates left for governor—Cosine's machine saw to the rest, the Chronicle's editorials saw to the middle, and fear saw to the edges. For the first time in history, the city was left in political ruin, a leaderless kingdom of thieves, murderers, and aristocrats all vying for the throne. Bailiffs took bribes in back rooms while priests preached order from cracked pulpits; the Ember Circle's embers hissed under rain, the Gloam Sisters' windows stayed dark a heartbeat too long, and in the spaces between, knives measured futures. And in the shadows, the Crows watched it all burn—Rabbit with that small, private nod that meant the coin had landed on the face he'd called, Jack rubbing at an ache only he could feel and smiling without showing teeth, Harry quiet and wide-eyed at the size of the fire he'd helped set.

Story: The Man Who Wasn't There

The Espiritas took them in swift silence, their masked figures moving with cold efficiency as the Crows were bound, disarmed, and dragged into their carriages. The air was thick with the scent of ozone, the residual crackle of electroplasm still hanging between them like an unspoken threat. Jack clenched his jaw, his mind already working through possible escape routes, but Rabbit Foot gave him a single look—a look that said, Trust me.

For days, the Espiritas interrogated them. They were thorough, methodical, but the Crows had faced worse. Jack endured in silence, giving only smirks and half-truths when pressed. Harry, though shaken, quickly learned the game, deflecting with half-answers and innocent shrugs. But it was Rabbit who played his role best. He didn't resist. He let them think he was just another gambler who had gotten in too deep, just another fool swept up in things beyond his control. And then, when the time was right, he made his move.

With a single contact, Rabbit set the gears of their release into motion. Cosine, the politician he and Harry had cultivated as an ally, worked his magic. It took a few days, but by the time the Crows were escorted out of their cells, they weren't just free men—they were ghosts. Their records erased, their involvement in the attack rewritten to paint Morian Ishtar as the villain. The city was in chaos, a political scandal of unprecedented scale, and the Crows were walking away clean. By the time they made it back to their hideout, the weight of their escape still clung to them.

Harleena had been waiting. She had seen them taken, but she hadn't let herself be caught. Trusting Rabbit was one thing, but she wasn't the type to let herself get locked up when she could do something about it. She had spent the past few days planning their jailbreak, only for them to stroll through the door as if nothing had happened. She was pleased, of course, but she didn't say it outright. Instead, as they settled in, she let them tell their sides of the story. Jack leaned against the table, rolling his shoulders as if shaking off the last remnants of his imprisonment. "So," he said, his voice dry, "should I even ask how you pulled that off, Rabbit?" Rabbit smirked, stretching out on the old couch. "You know me. Always have an ace up my sleeve." Harry let out a breath, rubbing his temples. "I don't know about you guys, but I need about a week of sleep before I do anything else." Harleena snorted. "You say that, but we both know you're going to spend the next two hours pacing before passing out at your desk." Harry opened his mouth to protest but stopped when they all heard it.

A sound at the gate.

Harleena's trained hound was the first to react, barking furiously, its body low and tense. The cat that had been living in their hideout darted for cover, its back arched in alarm. That was a bad sign. Harry froze. "Are you expecting someone?" he asked quietly. Harleena shook her head. "No." A bad feeling settled over the group. Harleena moved without hesitation, slipping into the kitchen as she sent her hound outside, her vision shifting to its eyes. Harry, moving quickly but quietly, made his way upstairs to get a better look from the window. Rabbit and Jack stayed by the door. The figure at the gate was already making his way into the garden, moving with a strange, easy confidence, completely unbothered by the dog barking at his heels. The hound snapped at him, but he never even flinched.

Jack took a slow step forward, his hand hovering near his knife. Then Rabbit got a good look at him. Tall and lean, his piercing green eyes gleamed with manic intensity, a smirk dancing across his lips as if he were savoring some private joke. His hair was wild and unkempt, barely contained beneath the shadows of the dim lantern light. He walked around the snarling hound with ease, his boots

crunching softly against the gravel as he stepped toward the house. Jack narrowed his eyes. “Who the hell—” And then Rabbit whispered, barely audible—

“Valesque.”

Jack had barely closed the door before he heard the first chuckle. It was light, casual—like the sound an old friend might make when greeting someone they hadn’t seen in years. But there was something off about it. Something wrong. Merrow Valesque grinned, his green eyes glittering with something Jack couldn’t quite place. He held up a small gift bag, waggling it slightly before handing it over. Jack hesitated but took it, peering inside. A wine bottle. Jack frowned. Every part of him screamed that this was a game, a joke—a performance where he was the audience and Merrow was the star. “So,” Merrow said, spreading his arms as if inviting an embrace. “Won’t you let an old friend inside?” Jack tightened his grip on the bag. No was the obvious answer. He forced a casual stance, nodding toward the garden. “Why don’t we talk out here?” Merrow let out a sharp laugh, tilting his head like an amused bird. “Oh, Jackie boy, don’t be rude. I came all this way just to see you.” His voice dipped into something sweet, saccharine. “Let’s be hospitable.” And then he moved. Not fast. Not aggressive. But with the simple, confident ease of a man who had already decided the outcome of this conversation. He stepped forward, heading straight for the door.

Jack’s instincts screamed. He moved before thinking, reaching into his pocket and yanking out a small, thin cloth—its fibers soaked in trance powder, a knockout agent strong enough to drop a man in seconds. He lunged, slamming it over Merrow’s face just as Harleena’s hound struck from the side, sinking its teeth into Merrow’s leg with a vicious snarl. But the expected struggle never came.

Instead, Merrow stood there, unmoving. His grin remained untouched, unwavering. The dog’s jaws tightened around his calf, but no blood spilled, no flesh tore—only something… wrong. Jack’s hand, pressed firm against Merrow’s face, felt it first. Wet. Cold. Gritty.

A sensation that was entirely unnatural. Jack recoiled, yanking his hand back, and his stomach twisted. His fingers were covered in something thick, like wet sand mixed with old, decayed muck. The texture clung to his skin, soaking into the creases of his palm. Merrow didn’t flinch. No—he shifted. His skin rippled, his flesh melting into something grotesque, something inhuman. The place where Jack had touched his face distorted, reshaping into an obscene imitation of flesh before sloughing away like mud dripping from a crumbling wall. His smirk widened as his eyes sank slightly, turning into hollow pits of darkness, his whole form convulsing and stretching. His clothes dissolved into the morphing sludge of his body, his limbs lengthening unnaturally. His fingers, once normal, became dripping tendrils of clay, twitching like living things. Jack stumbled back, his breath caught in his throat. Merrow Valesque wasn’t here.

Mudraith was. With a sickening, gurgling sound, the thing lunged. Jack barely had time to react before one of Mudraith’s grotesque, dripping arms struck him, slamming into his chest with a force that knocked the air from his lungs. He hit the ground hard, his back smacking against the dirt. Mudraith surged forward, his body folding over itself in ways no human should move, his massive form collapsing like a wave. A thick, heavy hand formed from the rolling sludge, wrapping around Jack’s throat and pressing down. The weight was suffocating. The stench—damp earth, rotting wood, and something old—flooded Jack’s nose as his vision blurred. He clawed at the fingers strangling him, but they weren’t fingers anymore. They were clay, reshaping, thickening, sealing around his neck like a living vise. Inside the house, Rabbit heard the first thump against the door. Then another. The wood groaned under the impact. He stepped forward, brow furrowing, just as a sickening squelch echoed through the air. His stomach twisted as he saw it—dark, oozing clay seeping through the cracks in the door, slipping through the gaps in the wood, curling like tendrils searching for something alive. Jack was outside. And he was about to die.

Rabbit struggled against the door, but the clay held it fast, sealing the wood shut like an organic lock. He could hear Jack choking outside, the desperate gasps of a man being smothered alive. Panic surged in his chest. The stories of a monster made of clay had always seemed like exaggerations, urban myths whispered between thieves and killers in Doskvol’s underbelly. But now, those stories had weight—suffocating, crushing weight. Rabbit slammed his fist against the door. "Enough! Let him go and come inside. We have business to attend to." For a moment, silence. Then, as if

responding to his command, the door exploded inward. A wave of clay surged through the opening, reforming, shifting, reshaping. It climbed and twisted, molding into something solid, something terrifyingly human. Within seconds, Merrow Valesque stood in the wreckage of the doorway, smoothing out the creases in his coat as if he had simply stepped over the threshold like a polite guest. Jack dropped onto the ground outside, gasping for air, coughing up flecks of clay from his throat. Beside him lay a small, mud-streaked package—whatever Merrow had been carrying before the attack. Merrow turned his attention to Rabbit, his manic grin unwavering. "Unfortunate," he said, his voice laced with amusement. "I hadn't planned on revealing myself this early."

Rabbit, still catching his breath, narrowed his eyes. "So… was it always you?" Merrow tilted his head, the grin widening before his body began to shift once again. His features melted, twisted, and in an instant, Rabbit found himself staring into his own face. Mudraith now stood before him as a perfect replica, the only difference being the unnatural way he grinned—too wide, too wrong. Harleena and Harry had rushed to Jack's side by now, helping him sit upright. Harry looked toward the doorway in horror, still shaken from the encounter. Rabbit exhaled, knowing they had no choice. "Alright," he said, forcing calm into his voice. "Let's talk." Mudraith molded himself back into Merrow as he stepped into the office, settling into a chair like a man without a care in the world. His sadistic smirk never faltered as he folded his hands on the table. "You guys are very interesting," he said. "But you're starting to intrigue us."

Rabbit sat across from him, his hands clasped together to keep them from twitching. Harleena entered the room behind him, her body tense, ready to strike if needed. Rabbit leaned forward. "What do you mean?" Merrow's green eyes glittered. "I've been watching you," he said, his voice lilting, almost musical. "It feels like every major event in Doskvol now a days has a crow or two singing at it.." Rabbit didn't flinch. "We are preparing ourselves, well, for the real Merrow."

Merrow burst into laughter, slapping his knee. "Yes, indeed! I do love a man with initiative!" Then, without breaking his manic grin, he continued, "That's why I came to leave an invitation of my own." Harleena stiffened. "What kind of invitation?" she asked, her voice betraying the faintest trace of fear. Merrow's entire body twitched. Then, in a grotesque display, he became Harleena—down to her clothes, her scars, even the faint nervous tic she had when she was uneasy. Mimicking her exact tone, he repeated mockingly, "What kind of invitation?" The illusion shattered as he snapped back into his usual form, giggling like a delighted child. "I have something interesting planned," he continued. "And I want the Crows there." Rabbit didn't let his expression change. "Why would we attend?" Merrow only chuckled. "Why don't you open your gift and find out?" Jack, still sitting outside, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before reaching for the package Merrow had dropped during the struggle. His fingers hesitated as he undid the binding, pulling back the layers of damp paper.

Inside was an hourglass. But instead of sand, a strange purple gas flowed within—unnatural, weightless. It didn't fall downward as one would expect, but instead, rose, moving against gravity to measure time. Next to it, a single playing card. The Joker card. But it wasn't ordinary. Three balloons had been hand-drawn onto it in rough pencil, and at the bottom, a crude, childlike sketch of a dead crow. Jack's blood ran cold. Harry, peering over his shoulder, felt his breath hitch as his eyes locked onto the swirling purple gas. His voice came out in a whisper, barely able to contain the horror in his tone. "Jack…" he swallowed. "That's Ladher."

Merrow stood up, stretching his arms as if he had just finished a pleasant conversation over tea rather than delivering a veiled threat drenched in horror. With a cheerful grin, he dusted himself off and clasped his hands together. "Well," he said, voice lilting with delight, "I believe my work here is done. I do so hope to see you all at the next balloon race above Doskvol." Rabbit's expression remained unreadable, though his mind raced. "Who's organizing it?" he asked carefully. Merrow turned at the doorway, the light from outside casting his sharp features in an eerie silhouette. He gave an exaggerated bow, his eyes gleaming with something unhinged. "Why, none other than our dear Oskar Pennwright!" And just like that, he stepped outside as if nothing had happened. His boots clicked against the wooden porch, his stride light and casual, as though he had simply dropped by to deliver a dinner invitation. Whistling a cheerful tune, he walked out of the Crows' hideout and into the streets of Doskvol, disappearing into the mist. Inside, the Crows were left frozen, locked in a stunned

silence that felt suffocating. None of them spoke, but the unspoken truth hung heavy in the air. This was very bad. Mudraith—if that's what he was—must be a close ally to Merrow. And if this was the kind of ally Merrow had at his disposal, then he was more dangerous than anyone had ever imagined. He wasn't just a threat to the Crows—he was a cataclysm waiting to happen. The entire city of Doskvol was in danger.

Jack, still leaning against the doorway, clutching his ribs and trying to steady his breath, felt his pulse slow—just a little. Then something caught his eye. Upstairs. A window on the second floor. Open. His breath hitched. That window had been closed before. He was sure of it. His stomach twisted. "Rabbit," Jack said, barely able to keep the dread out of his voice. "Upstairs." Rabbit and Harry exchanged a glance before bolting up the stairs two at a time. Harleena lingered near the door, her hand gripping her dagger, still trying to process what had just happened. The room they burst into was where Cross Daava had been staying. The window was wide open. The cold air swept through the room, rattling loose papers and making the candlelight flicker. And in the center of it, Daava stood motionless.

Something was wrong. His eyes—rolled all the way back into his head—stared blankly at the ceiling. His body trembled, barely holding itself up. His lips moved, whispering something, repeating it over and over like a broken record. "Late, late," he muttered, his voice barely a breath. "Says the White Rabbit. Late, late, says the White Rabbit." Rabbit's blood turned to ice. He had heard this before. Harry swallowed hard, stepping cautiously forward. "Shit," he whispered, glancing at Rabbit. "This is the same as the attack on Tobias's hotel."

They had seen people like this before—hypnotized, controlled. The attackers who had stormed Tobias's hotel the previous week had been just like this—lost in their own minds, puppets bound by unseen strings. But who had gotten to Daava? Rabbit's instincts screamed at him to act, and it was a good thing they did. In a sudden, jerking motion, Daava lunged for the desk. His fingers curled around a knife.

"Daava—no!" Rabbit and Harry both reacted in an instant. Rabbit grabbed Daava's arm, twisting it away before he could drive the blade into his own throat. Harry grabbed him around the waist, forcing him down onto the floor. The ex-governor thrashed violently, screaming that eerie, repetitive phrase, his voice raw, inhuman. It took both of them working together to pin him down and bind his wrists with rope. Even then, he writhed against his restraints like a fish caught in a net, his lips still murmuring. "Late, late, says the White Rabbit." A shiver ran through Rabbit's spine. The Crows were in grave danger from now on. There was no denying it. Merrow hadn't just paid them a visit—he had infected them with his madness. And if whoever had taken control of Daava was working with him, then the game had just changed. And not in their favor.

Dramatis Personae & Factions at a Glance

The Crows (our crew)

- **Jack** — Planner of the crows, ambitious member. The Slide of the group.
- **Harleena** — The Hound of the Family, an experienced hunter of both men and animals.
- **Rabbit's Foot** — The Gambler, a weaver of fates. Respected member.
- **Harry** — Young sorcerer, learns fast and has a lot to prove.

Allies & Associates

- **Dr. Lazarus Finch** — Surgeon; keeps secrets stitched.
- **Cuzão** — Survivor, desperate runner bearing names. Stoneborn member.
- **Boquinha** — Lock-breaker, quick with her hands. Member of the Stoneborn orphans.
- **Nicolas Nightwood** — Broker of whispers at the Shadow's Den. Apparent leader of Enigma group.
- **Jackie Comber "the Mist"** — Unseen leader, enigmatic commander of shadows.
- **Constant** — Powerful and experienced mage, lone contractor.
- **Cross Daava** — Ex-governor, now a broken pawn.
- **Ulric Stoneborn** — Fierce Stoneborn orphan leader, born commander.

Powers & Adversaries

- **Merrow Valesque** — Smiling catastrophe; Leader of the Royal Family. Linked with Ladher/Lædir.
- **Captain Morian Ishtar** — Imperial Police Captain; law with teeth.
- **Emberlash** — Circle zealot; master of living fire.
- **Ember Circle** — Aristocratic arsonists; Emberlash lights their sermons.
- **Lira Quinval** — Gloam matriarch; vengeance made flesh.
- **Thalira Ishtar** — The Oracle; silver-haired seer with hidden ties.
- **The Espiritas** — Masked wardens, hunters of spirit and man alike.

Places that Matter

- **Crow's Ward Safehouse & Hospital** — The Crows' heart, beating in secret.
- **The Iron Den** — Orphanage-fort turned battlefield.
- **Whispering Grove** — Deadlands sanctuary for the Unseen.
- **Night Market** — Freight, marks, and midnight coin.

The Chapter List

Chapter 00: The Breath Before the Beginning

A moody prelude, set on the days before the story starts. Merrow finds himself in his last fight against an alliance that Doskvol has never seen before. Last fight until he was released, of course.

Chapter 1: Instruments of Lies and Men

The Crows take their first careful steps into the growing war, navigating treachery, ambition, and shifting alliances. After bringing back information from the Black Marrow, they must share all they know about Ladher with the Enigma Group.

Chapter 2: Legitimacy as a Mask

The crew explores the facade of power in Doskvol—Tobias Ford is given the task to find a place where a legitimate business from the Crows can grow.

Story: Running from Fire

A sudden attack started. The Stoneborn kids are in danger, life or death hangs in the hands of Cuzao.

Chapter 3: Flames of Desperation – Part 1

The Crows are thrust into the thick of battle as the Ember Circle's onslaught begins. Cuzao needs their help to save his friends.

Chapter 4: Flames of Desperation – Part 2

The attack escalates, leading to tragedy and loss. It leaves scars in Doskvol itself, and the Crows begin to realize the true cost of their war.

Chapter 5: Crows at the Crater

Aftermath of the Circle's devastation. The Crows regroup with Ulric Stoneborn, cementing uneasy alliances while suspicion and fear brew beneath the surface.

News: Fires of Chaos – The Day Horror Descended on Ashvale

An in-world article dissecting the Ashvale attacks, prison break, and the return of Merrow's lieutenants.

Chapter 6: Mysteries Beneath the Darkened Veil

The Crows join Constant to investigate Trickerium's cursed house. Inside, they face illusions, monstrous traps, and the Dark One itself—only to emerge scarred, with Constant lost to the void.

Chapter 7: Where the Children Play

The Crows travel to the Whispering Grove, where they find Jackie Comber sheltering the orphans and meet the Oracle of the Unseen. Secrets surface, Harry receives a vision, and the Crows leave with more questions than answers.

Chapter 8: In the Wake of Assumption

The Crows launch their assault on Assumption Church, guided by the eerie child Boquinha. Inside, Jack gambles with stolen magic, Rabbit nearly loses the Umbral Ring, and Harry crosses a deadly line with his first kill. As allies and agendas collide, the Crows seize ground, but the shadows of betrayal and the mystery of the Blackwood twins deepen the stakes.

Story: Lord Veylock and Morten Discuss the News

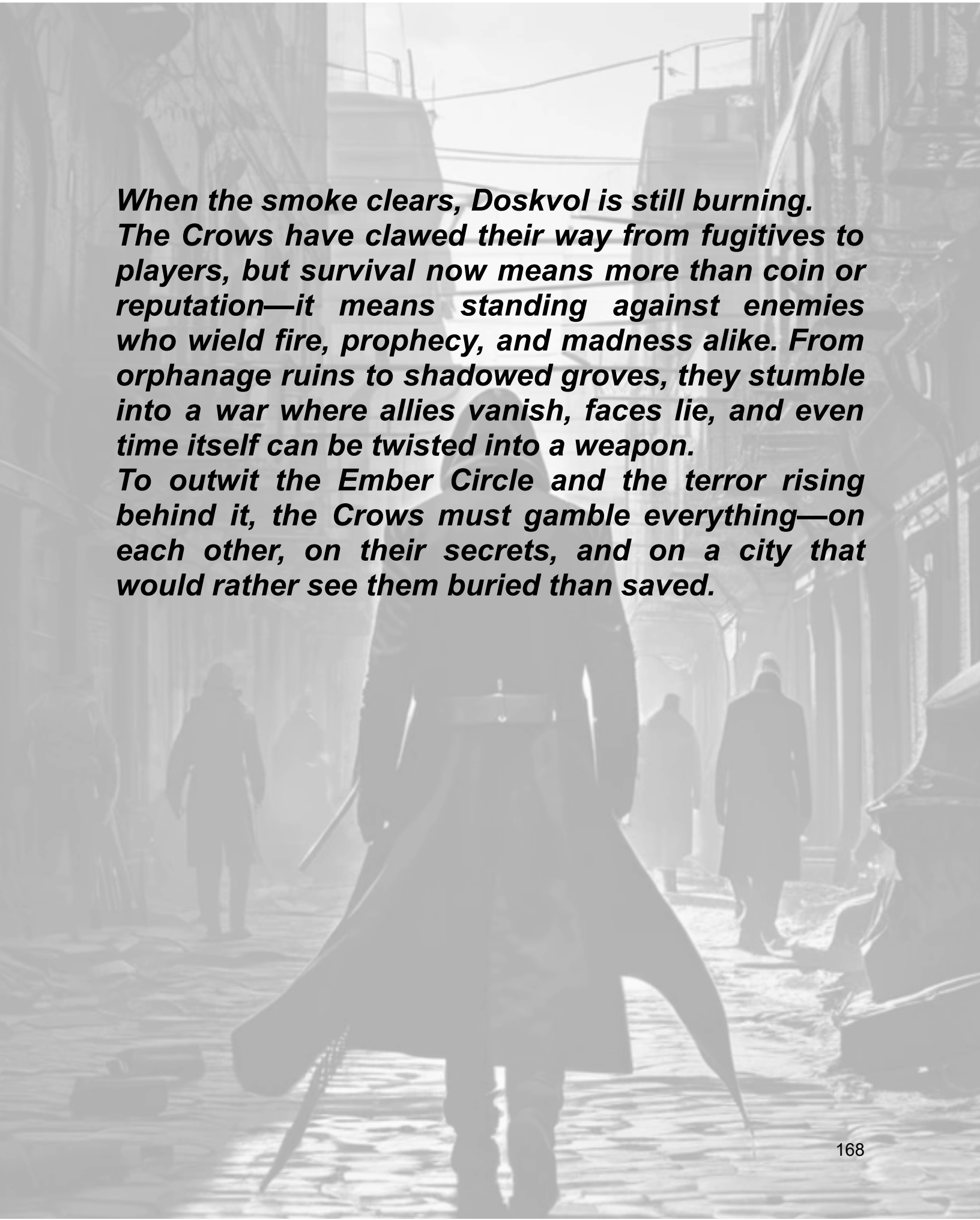
In the quiet of his study, Lord Veylock and his servant Morten dissect the shocking news of the Assumption Church attack. Their conversation turns from the Crows' rising reputation to the looming political ascent of Captain Morian Ishtar.

Chapter 9: The Last Candidate

In the crumbling streets of Doskvol, the Crows find themselves drawn into a deadly game of politics and power in order to stop an undesirable candidate. Shadows tighten around them as allies blur into enemies, and every choice carries a cost. By night's end, the city itself feels closer to collapse.

Story: The Man Who Wasn't There

Merrow pays a visit to the Crows himself. Now what?



When the smoke clears, Doskvol is still burning. The Crows have clawed their way from fugitives to players, but survival now means more than coin or reputation—it means standing against enemies who wield fire, prophecy, and madness alike. From orphanage ruins to shadowed groves, they stumble into a war where allies vanish, faces lie, and even time itself can be twisted into a weapon.

To outwit the Ember Circle and the terror rising behind it, the Crows must gamble everything—on each other, on their secrets, and on a city that would rather see them buried than saved.